

RHODESIAN LIGHT INFANTRYMAN 1961–80



NEIL GRANT

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

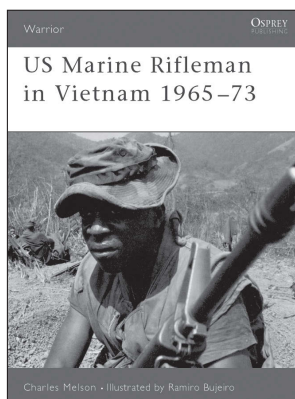
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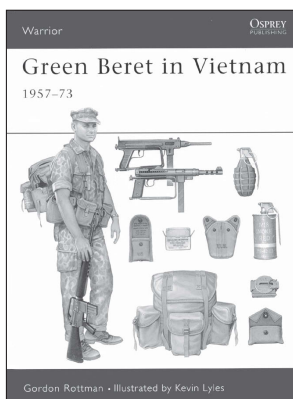
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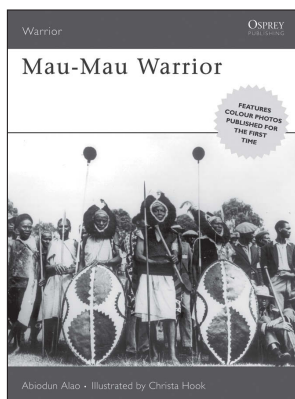
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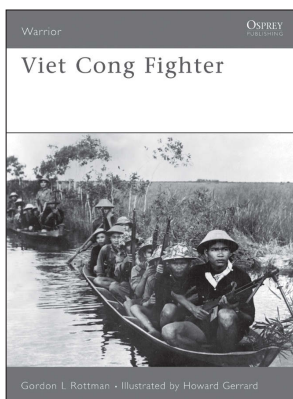
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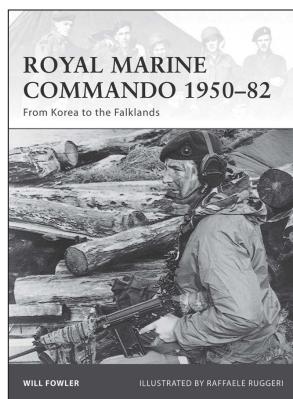
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NEIL GRANT

ILLUSTRATED BY PETER DENNIS

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RHODESIAN LIGHT INFANTRYMAN 1961–80

INTRODUCTION

The Rhodesian Light Infantry (RLI) existed for only two decades. During that time, however, it rose from difficult beginnings to become the cutting edge of the Rhodesian military during the bush war. Its ranks were filled by Rhodesian regular soldiers, National Servicemen and foreign volunteers from around the world. Although its equipment was limited to what a small country could afford, and what could be obtained under international sanctions, it pioneered innovative tactics, including the air-mobile counter-insurgency ‘fireforce’ and took part in some of the most audacious airborne operations in history. Moreover, its soldiers repeatedly engaged many times their own number and emerged victorious, inflicting 35 enemy casualties for each of their own.

Despite these battlefield victories, Rhodesia could not survive political isolation and economic sanctions, nor could the small white population meet the financial and manpower demands of high-intensity guerrilla warfare. Yet the RLI and the rest of the security forces were able to convince their enemies that they could not defeat the Rhodesians outright in the field, and forced them to accept a negotiated political settlement to end the war.

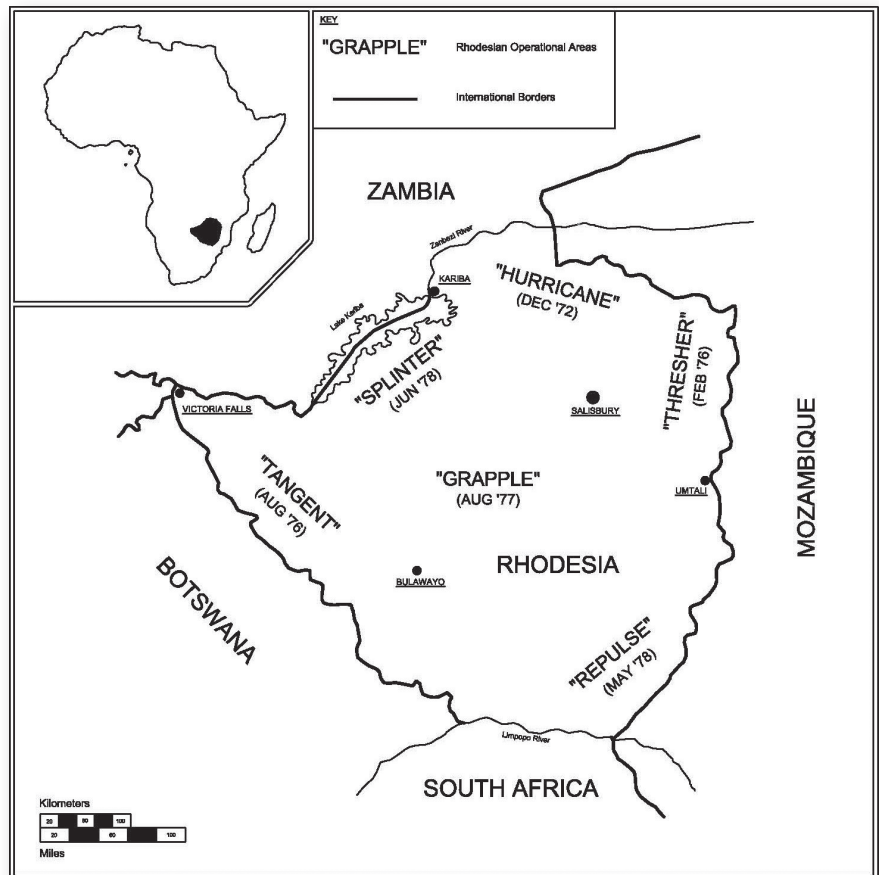


Corporal Bruce Kidd of 3 Cdo after a fireforce operation. Note the rifle magazines taped together for a fast reload, and the radio handset attached to the webbing. (RLI Regimental Association)

CHRONOLOGY

August 1953	The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland formed, uniting Northern Rhodesia, Southern Rhodesia and Nyasaland.
June 1960	The Belgian Congo gains independence, but slides into anarchy as black troops mutiny and the rich province of Katanga secedes.
September 1960	No. 1 Training Unit formed at Brady Barracks, Bulawayo.
December 1961	The Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU) is formed after previous nationalist groups have been banned.
February 1961	No. 1 Training Unit becomes 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry.
April 1962	The RLI moves to Cranborne Barracks, Salisbury.
August 1963	ZAPU dissidents form the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU).
December 1963	The Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland is dissolved. Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland become independent as Zambia and Malawi. Britain refuses Southern Rhodesia independence without immediate majority rule, while the Rhodesians offer a phased transition over 15 years.
September 1964	Marxist FRELIMO (<i>Frente de Libertação de Moçambique</i> – Mozambique Liberation Front) rebels begin a campaign against Portuguese colonial government in Mozambique.
November 1964	The RLI becomes a commando battalion.
November 1965	Rhodesian Prime Minister Ian Smith announces the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI). British-inspired UN sanctions ban the sale of goods (including fuel and military equipment) to Rhodesia, and the purchase of Rhodesian exports.
April 1966	Battle of Sinoia; the members of a guerrilla band are arrested or killed by security forces. The 'bush war' begins.
1967–68	ZIPRA (Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army) forces infiltrate Rhodesia, but are tracked down and eliminated (operations Nickel, Cauldron and others.)
December 1972	The Altena Farm attack marks intensification of the 'bush war'.
July 1973	The RLI begins to accept National Service conscripts.
June 1974	The first experimental fireforce operation takes place.
April 1974	Leftist military coup overthrows the Portuguese government. The new government abandons its colonial possessions; Mozambique becomes independent from June 1975. The new FRELIMO government allows ZANLA (Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army) to use the country as a base from which to attack Rhodesia.
December 1974	South African pressure forces a ceasefire. Imprisoned nationalist leaders are released for peace talks at Victoria Falls in August 1975, but no settlement is reached.
July 1975	The RLI is granted freedom of the city of Salisbury.

September 1976	Ian Smith accepts the principle of majority rule under UK, US and South African pressure. The Geneva peace talks begin, but collapse without resolution when the nationalists cannot agree amongst themselves.
April 1977	The reserve call-up is extended to all white males aged between 38 and 50.
1977	The RLI becomes a parachute battalion.
August 1977	A snap election gives Ian Smith an 85 per cent mandate for peace negotiations on the basis of majority rule.
November 1977	Operation Dingo takes place, a massive cross-border strike against ZANLA training camps in Mozambique.
September 1978	ZIPRA forces shoot down a Rhodesian Viscount airliner with a SAM-7 missile, and massacre the crash survivors. Rhodesian air strikes and airborne assaults against ZIPRA bases in Zambia are launched. A second Viscount is downed in February 1979.
April 1979	Elections are held after an 'internal settlement' is reached with nationalist groups willing to renounce violence. Moderate black nationalist Bishop Abel Muzorewa replaces Ian Smith as Prime Minister of Zimbabwe Rhodesia. ZIPRA and ZANLA boycott the elections and do not accept the results; sanctions continue.



Rhodesia and the surrounding states. (Author's collection)

- September–October 1979** The RLI, SAS (Special Air Service) and Selous Scouts conduct significant cross-border attacks into Mozambique (operations Uric, Miracle and Tepid).
- December 1979** The Lancaster House agreement ends the UDI.
- February–April 1980** New elections are held, with significant voter intimidation despite international monitoring. ZANU leader Robert Mugabe becomes prime minister, and announces independence as the Republic of Zimbabwe.
- October 1980** The Rhodesian Light Infantry is disbanded.

THE RHODESIAN WAR

Rhodesia was roughly the size of California, or 1½ times the size of the UK. The uplands around Salisbury were relatively cool, but dropped away to the scorchingly hot Zambezi valley in the north, and into wide plains to the south. Much of the country was sparsely inhabited and ‘big game’ such as elephant, lion and rhino could be a genuine danger on operations, though the ever-present Mopani flies were often regarded as a bigger nuisance.

Although whites formed only 225,000 of Rhodesia’s population of 5 million, they controlled the majority of the land and wealth. The government proudly maintained that Rhodesian blacks had a better standard of living than any other blacks in Africa. This was probably true, but it was enormously below that of Rhodesian whites.

The Rhodesian franchise was theoretically non-racial, but educational and economic qualifications meant that although almost all whites had the vote, very few blacks did. Although the council of chiefs provided some representation, and was taken seriously by the white government, it only reflected the more conservative rural blacks, not the increasingly radical nationalist urban blacks.

By the early 1960s, the nationalists formed two main parties. The Zimbabwe African People’s Union (ZAPU) and its military wing, the Zimbabwe People’s Revolutionary Army (ZIPRA), originally claimed to be non-tribal and to represent all black opposition, but the Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU) and its military wing, the Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army (ZANLA), broke away in 1963 and ultimately became the larger of the two.

The two movements differed in their tactics and the ethnic groups from which they drew support. ZIPRA primarily recruited from the Ndebele ethnic group, and was led by Joshua Nkomo. It was Soviet-backed and although it did infiltrate guerrillas into Rhodesia, particularly in the early years, it focused on building a conventional force including artillery and armour. Many suspected that this force was primarily intended to fight ZANLA after any settlement, rather than the Rhodesian forces. ZIPRA troops were generally better equipped, trained and disciplined than those of ZANLA. They were usually uniformed, whereas ZANLA fighters often wore a mix of uniforms and civilian clothes.



A young trooper from 2 Cdo in the Zambezi valley, in the late 1960s. (RLI Regimental Association)



MAG gunner Marius Marais. The picture was used in a recruiting poster with the slogan, 'It takes more than long hair and beads to win a war'. (RLI Regimental Association)

ZANLA recruited mostly from the Shona, the other main ethnic and linguistic group in Rhodesia. It was Chinese-backed, and advocated a Maoist campaign to control the black population by persuasion, indoctrination and intimidation. It focused on conducting guerrilla warfare within Rhodesia, initially from Zambia, and later Mozambique. It was led by Robert Mugabe during the main period of the war. ZANLA saw little benefit in confronting the security forces directly, preferring to force them to over-extend by attacking 'soft' targets such as farms while politicising the masses in preparation for a general uprising in the final phase of the struggle.

Although both movements were theoretically communist, their ideology had a definite local flavour, including the use of traditional 'spirit mediums' and propaganda referring back to the First Chimurenga, as the Ndebele and Shona called the Matabele uprising of 1896–97. Many hoped as late as 1968–69 that Britain would intervene on their behalf, and only looked to the communist bloc when Western aid was not forthcoming.

Guerrilla tactics typically involved entering a native village, demanding food, beer and women, conducting indoctrination sessions and leading the villagers in singing 'liberation songs'. They would then punish any villagers accused of supporting the security forces. Such 'sell-outs' were beaten or bayoneted to death in public rituals; informers often had their eyes gouged out or their lips cut off beforehand.

Young men would be recruited for guerrilla training, while younger teenagers would become *majibas*, providing lookouts, couriers and informants. Recruitment often emphasised material benefits (pay, loot and status) as much as political ones, and some men said that they would have joined the Rhodesian African Rifles (RAR) to fight for the government equally willingly. Not all were willing volunteers; some were press-ganged, and guerrillas even raided rural schools to take the pupils away as recruits. Training emphasised political indoctrination as much as military skills and recruits were rarely warned about the firepower of the Rhodesian forces.

The guerrillas were generally equipped with Warsaw Pact small arms – PPSH sub-machine guns were common in the early days, though replaced later by SKS semi-automatic rifles, AK47 assault rifles and RPD light machine guns. The last three all fired the Soviet 7.62 x 39mm cartridge, which was less powerful than the 7.62 x 51mm round used by the Rhodesians. Support weapons included RPG-2 and RPG-7 rocket launchers and 60mm mortars. Camps outside Rhodesia might be defended by 12.7mm or 14.5mm heavy machine guns, 75mm and 82mm recoilless rifles and even SAM-7 anti-aircraft missiles.

The two movements were not always on good terms, although they cohabited uncomfortably as the Patriotic Front from 1976; there were sometimes even armed clashes between them.



During operations in Mozambique after the Portuguese withdrawal, the Rhodesians also came up against the FRELIMO (*Frente de Libertação de Moçambique*, or Mozambique Liberation Front) armed forces. These were organised as a conventional army along Soviet lines, with anti-aircraft weapons, artillery and armoured vehicles.

Troops deploying from an Alouette early in the war. At this stage, the more lightly armed helicopters could carry a larger stick of troops. (RLI Regimental Association)

STRUCTURE OF THE RLI

The Rhodesian Light Infantry was a single battalion, commanded by a lieutenant-colonel. It originally followed contemporary British practice, with a headquarters company and four rifle companies (A–D). The latter company was originally a ‘boy’s company’ of junior soldiers aged between 16 and 18. Each company had 3 platoons of 37 men in 3 sections.

When the RLI became a commando battalion in 1964–65, the rifle companies were redesignated as three numbered commandos. Each Commando (Cdo) had a paper strength of around 130 men, although absences through leave, courses and injuries meant the actual average fighting strength was usually nearer 70 men. Commandos were usually commanded by majors, with a captain as second in command.

Each Commando theoretically had 5 troops of 24 men each, but in practice only 4 troops were established, and even those were usually short of men. Troops were officially commanded by lieutenants, but a shortage of manpower meant some had non-commissioned officers (NCOs) as acting troop commanders. Troops were divided into two patrols, then into sticks or stops. These initially had five men, but were reduced to four (stick leader, two riflemen, MAG gunner) between 1967 and 1968

A Ferret armoured car of the Recce Troop in 1973. (RLI Regimental Association)





A Rhodesian Army recruiting poster. (Author's collection)

when the carrying capacity of the Alouette helicopters was reduced. Sticks were generally led by corporals or lance-corporals, though the perennial NCO shortage meant that some were actually led by senior troopers.

The headquarters company was renamed Base Group, and provided administrative support (pay, catering, motor transport, regimental police etc.), plus a recruit-training troop. Support Group was originally part of Base Group, but became a separate Commando in January 1976. It contained a number of specialist troops, though not all existed throughout the period, and the men from these troops were often deployed as normal riflemen:

- Mortar troop with three sections of 2 x 81mm mortars each; a second troop of 60mm mortars was formed in 1972 but broken up to give each Commando a mortar section in 1977;
- Reconnaissance Troop, with two sections of four Ferret armoured cars each plus a command vehicle. These were transferred to the armoured car regiment in 1974;
- Tracking Troop (from 1972); this took over the Reconnaissance Troop name in 1976,

when it gained other responsibilities, including sniping;

- Anti-Tank Troop (from 1976) with three sections, each with 2 x 106mm recoilless rifles mounted on Unimog four-wheel drive vehicles;
- Assault Pioneer Troop (from 1977), capable of tasks including demolitions and mine laying/clearance.

RECRUITMENT AND ENLISTMENT

The Rhodesian armed forces had traditionally been 80 per cent black, and this remained the case throughout the bush war. However, concern over the Mau-Mau Rebellion in Kenya and the mutinies by black troops in the Congo convinced the Federal Army to create at least one 'European' (i.e. white) regiment, as a safeguard against similar problems. This inevitably restricted the manpower pool; while the Rhodesian African Rifles gained additional battalions during the war, the RLI remained a single battalion, and one that was usually below strength.

Most RLI recruits were Rhodesians, though since more than half the white population had arrived after World War II, many were actually first- or second-generation immigrants. Despite their 'pioneer' self-image, such recruits might come from urban backgrounds with no particular familiarity with the bush before joining the army.

The original No. 1 Training Unit had recruited heavily from South Africa and the UK, and the RLI continued to take 'foreign' recruits, especially after an overseas recruiting campaign in 1974. Recruitment from the US increased after several articles appeared in the magazine *Soldier of Fortune*.

Most 'foreigners' came from South Africa, the UK and Commonwealth or the US, but the RLI included men of 38 nationalities from Frenchmen to Norwegians at various times, and they made up more than 10 per cent of its manpower. Many had military experience in other armies. One RLI veteran described their motives: 'The volunteers came for many and varied reasons. For some it was the action and adventure. For others it was the glory. Many came in the belief they were fighting to stop the spread of international communism. And there were a few who were there just for the love of killing' (Cocks 1988, p. 86). Although some called these foreigners mercenaries, they served on the same terms as Rhodesian recruits, and for the same pay, regardless of previous rank or military experience.

The RLI originally took only regular recruits enlisting for a minimum of three years. However, it began to take National Service conscripts in 1973. This influx of National Servicemen was initially unpopular with the regulars, and the first intakes had a tough time gaining acceptance, but they formed a majority of the troops after intake 150 in 1976.

Rhodesian National Service had already been extended to 12 months by the time the RLI began to take these men in 1973, and increased to 18 months in 1976. Those wanting to enter university did 24 months' National Service, but then avoided the normal reserve commitment during their degree. The increases made National Servicemen more effective soldiers, since men only became really effective and 'bush wise' towards the end of the first year, when they had some experience on top of their initial training. The extensions had an immediate effect; one unlucky National Service intake discovered on their last day of service that they actually had to serve another six months.

Not all 'Nashos' were happy to serve, and the government thought it necessary to prohibit young men of military age from leaving the country without permission. In practice, most National Servicemen chose to make the best of things, integrated quickly into the unit, and performed effectively. Their arrival also changed the unit, with many of the new recruits having a higher standard of education.

Most troopers were young, around 19 to 21, though regulars and foreign volunteers were often a few years older. A few recruits were as young as 17, and needed a consent note signed by their parents to serve. Those under 18 were kept out of combat after the outcry that followed the deaths of two 17-year-olds in 1968.

TRAINING

Training was chaotic during the regiment's first year, with too few instructors and shortages of key equipment. This reflected the difficulties of setting up an entire unit from scratch, and things settled down once the unit became established. Recruit training initially lasted 14 weeks, increasing to 16 and then 19 weeks in later years.



Trooper Wayne Hannekom. This photo was used as the model for 'The Trooper' memorial to the RLI's fallen. (RLI Regimental Association)

Men joining as regulars reported directly to the RLI at Cranborne Barracks, Salisbury, but might have had to wait several weeks until there were enough recruits to form a course. They might be ignored while they waited, or used as ‘wasters’ to run messages and do odd jobs.

Most National Servicemen reported to the Rhodesia Regiment depot at Llewellyn Barracks, Bulawayo, where they received basic in-processing and underwent physical and mental aptitude tests. Those in the highest physical categories could volunteer for the RLI, and those who did were put through fitness tests and a cross-country run. Men completing the run within the specified time went to Cranborne to join the regular recruits at the RLI training troop.

The first few days were occupied with medicals, vaccinations, form filling and the issue of a bewildering mass of equipment, from ‘Shorts PT Green’ to ‘Buckles, Belt, Brass’, all of which the recruits found themselves responsible for assembling and cleaning. The process included a drastic haircut; recruits were advised to get a short haircut before joining up, to let the skin previously covered by the long civilian haircuts of the time adjust to the strong African sun. Most recruits did not do so, and suffered sunburned necks on top of the other hardships of training.

The first weeks of training focused on breaking down ‘civilian’ attitudes of the recruits and turning them into disciplined, obedient soldiers. Recruits were assured they were ‘lower than shark shit’ by the instructional staff, who one recruit firmly believed ‘were chosen for their inability to get on with their fellow men’ (Taylor 2007, p. 26).

The recruits’ day started with roll call at 0530 followed by PT at 0600. Their lives were organised on a punishing schedule of drill, physical fitness

A

INFANTRYMAN, OPERATION CAULDRON, 1968

Operation Cauldron began in March 1968 when a chance discovery by a game ranger revealed a group of over 100 ZIPRA and South African ANC (African National Congress) guerrillas had infiltrated across the Zambezi and set up a series of camps and equipment caches to facilitate further incursions. Over the next two weeks, a joint force from the RLI and RAR hunted down and eliminated the guerrillas in a series of contacts that left 58 guerrillas dead and 51 captured, for the loss of 3 RLI soldiers, with only 9 guerrillas returning to Zambia.

At this stage in the war, the RLI had received camouflage jackets, trousers and caps, but not camouflage shirts, and were still wearing British-style 1944 pattern webbing. The central figure is armed with an early version of the FN rifle, with wooden butt. Slings were generally still fitted, and weapons were not camouflaged.

A selection of personal kit is shown. The green RLI beret adopted in 1964 (1) was worn with a silver version of the badge (2); recruits wore a bronze version, while the crown was removed after Rhodesia became a republic in 1970. All troops were issued with a paybook (3).

FN rifles were initially supplemented by the .303-calibre Bren light machine gun (4), which fed from a curved 30-round box magazine, then by the belt fed 7.62mm FN MAG (5). The 3.5in rocket launcher (6), seen here with one of its HEAT (High-Explosive Anti-Tank) rockets, was issued, but rarely carried on operations. The British No. 36 (Mills) grenade (7) used early in the war was replaced by the South African M962 (8).

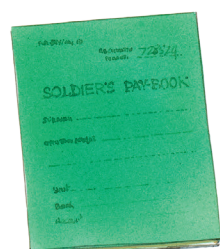
Personal equipment included a three-bladed pocket knife (9) and FN cleaning kit (10), plus a syringe of the morphine substitute Sosegon (11) often worn on the same cord as the ID tags (12). Theoretically, the green tag would remain with the body, while the red tag was removed and passed to the unit commander to provide a list of the dead. However, this rarely happened in practice, due to the small scale of the conflict. Every man would carry at least one field dressing (13) and at least one trooper would carry a panga or machete (14). Since operations at this date included prolonged foot patrolling, each trooper carried a rucksack (15) containing kit, rations and (most importantly) extra water.



1



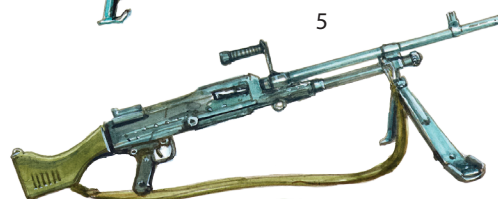
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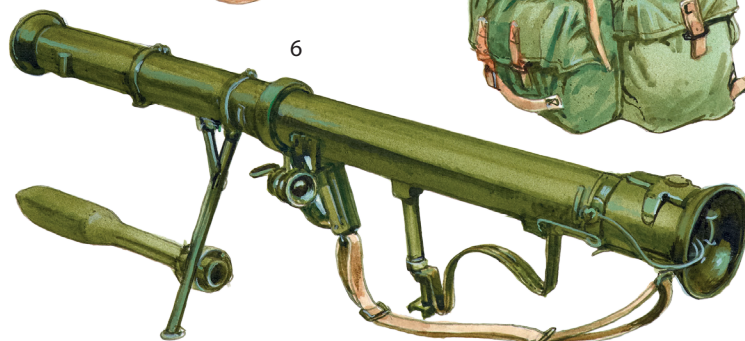
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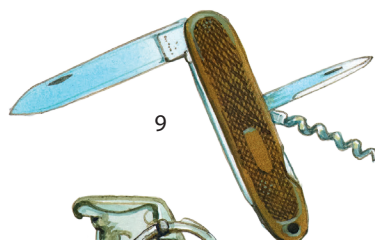
12



11



10



9



8



7

Recruits on the assault course.
Note that they are armed with
obsolete Lee-Enfield rifles. (RLI
Regimental Association)



and training that left insufficient time for sleep. Uniforms, equipment and barrack rooms had to be immaculate and laid out in extremely specific ways, with instructors ‘trashing’ imperfect kit layouts by sweeping them onto the floor. Even beds had to be made in a particular way; some recruits chose to sleep on the floor to keep their carefully made beds ready for inspection.

Punishments were easily earned during this phase, and could include doubling around the grenade wall, extra drill or physical training, or ‘change parades’ where the miscreant had to report to the guardroom every 30 minutes in a different order of dress (drill order, combat kit, PT kit etc.). It was almost impossible to get to the barrack room, changed and back to the guardroom within the set time unless the recruit’s squad rallied round to help him, assisting the bonding process.

After the first six weeks, most recruits had grasped the basics of drill and turnout well enough, and their fitness levels had improved until they no longer found the physical part of the course so punishing. Training became slightly more relaxed, if never actually easy. Some recruits were posted out at this point to specialist roles – as clerks, signallers, medics, and the like – while those who remained started to train as infantrymen.

There was no leave during the first six weeks of recruit training, but after that men could get a weekend pass covering Saturday afternoon and Sunday, provided they could pass inspection by the regimental police at the gate. This often proved difficult, and many recruits resigned themselves to spending their weekend in the barracks recreation room, catching up on their sleep or cleaning and polishing kit for the following week. Loss of leave was also used as a punishment.

The training was based on the British Army model, and included radio procedure, map reading and first aid as well as drill and weapons. Further training on counter-insurgency warfare was added later, including mine awareness and African customs, along with watermanship, rock climbing and basic demolitions.

Table 1: the training syllabus	
Subject	Total 40-minute periods
Foot and rifle drill	99
Platoon weapons and terrorist weapons	111
Fieldcraft and bushcraft	39
Radios and voice procedure	28
Map reading	32
First aid and medical	23
Physical training (including sports and assault course)	136
Counter-insurgency warfare (urban)	11
Conventional warfare/battlecraft	29
Counter-insurgency warfare (rural)	65
Rock climbing and watermanship	23
Mine awareness	10
Basic demolitions	8
Close Air Support/Ground Air Coordination	16
Survival techniques and practical exercises	25
Helicopter drills	12
African customs including short exercises	9
Live firing (all weapons)	95
Exercises (all types)	65
Counter-insurgency warfare battlecamp	95
Administration including vehicle movement to and from exercise areas	71
Demonstrations (all subjects)	25
Lectures, playlets and films (all subjects)	24
Tests (theoretical and practical on all subjects, including elementary weapon handling)	42
Inspections of turnout, kit and weapons	22
Passing out parade and demonstrations, including rehearsals	25
Total	1,140

Physical training included push-ups, running, ‘pokey drill’ exercise with rifles to strengthen the arm muscles and the assault course. Many of the 20-odd obstacles on the latter required teamwork as well as fitness, and squads not completing it within the specified time had to do it again.

Recruits also undertook long timed marches through the bush, navigating by map and compass while carrying a full load, building up to the five-day



Route marches and running built fitness and endurance. (RLI Regimental Association)

'Pokey drill' with rifles built up arm muscles, leading to better shooting as troops' arms tired less quickly. (RLI Regimental Association)



'one-twenty miler'. Because of the ever-present threat from guerrillas and dangerous wildlife, recruits were issued a single magazine of live rounds during field exercises, carefully sealed with tape to prevent it being accidentally confused with blank ammunition.

Weapon training included conventional marksmanship on the firing range, but focused heavily on 'jungle lane' shooting, emphasising rapid engagement of targets popping up unexpectedly at short range and practising 'immediate action' drills to clear stoppages until they became automatic.

B

BUSH PATROL AND TRACKER TEAM, 1972

Until the evolution of the fireforce concept, much of the RLI's time was spent in patrolling and interdiction work along the harsh Zambezi valley, the primary route for guerrilla infiltration. The first trackers were civilian game wardens or police, but the RLI soon trained its own. They worked in four-man teams, trading off the high-concentration job of being lead tracker every half hour or so. Although the lead tracker took primary responsibility for following the spoor, the flank trackers were invaluable as they would help widen the search if the lead tracker lost the spoor as it crossed stony ground. They also provided flank security for the lead tracker while he concentrated on the spoor; wily guerrillas were likely to circle around and set an ambush on their own tracks if they thought they were being followed.

The lead tracker (1) is bending low to make the very small shadows cast by the edges of the boot prints more obvious. A good tracker could estimate not only how many men he was following (by counting the number of separate prints in a yard of the tracks, and dividing by two), but also how heavily they were loaded (by depth of prints and shortened stride length), how tired or thirsty they were (by signs of feet dragging and irregular strides) and even whether they were ZANLA or ZIPRA (based on characteristic boot prints). Perhaps most importantly, he could estimate the age of the tracks, based on how weathered they were, and thus how far ahead the guerrillas were.

Dress was very informal during this phase of the war, with many men choosing to operate in shorts, T-shirts and Veldtschoen. Foot patrols had to carry rations and water for several days in their packs, though weight was kept to a minimum so the patrol could move as fast as possible and gain on their quarry.

One of the flank trackers (2) carries the heavy barrel version of the FN, to provide some fire support without the weight of a MAG. The lead tracker carries a Browning semi-automatic shotgun (3); a few of these were issued experimentally, but most men preferred the standard FN rifle.



Recruits were taught bushcraft, including how to find water, what plants were edible and basic tracking techniques. This culminated in a three-day survival exercise. Recruits were searched to ensure no food was smuggled along, and those who failed to pay sufficient attention went hungry.

Training built up from the individual to section and platoon tactics, reaching a peak in a large-scale classical warfare exercise, which might involve air support. Men who were injured during training, coped badly with discipline or did not achieve a high enough grade (up to 15–20 per cent of the men on the course) were ‘back squaded’, joining the next recruit course for a second try. Those who were unable to make the grade on their second course were either used in non-combatant positions as clerks or storemen, or transferred out to finish their service with a territorial unit.

For the majority who did make the grade, training culminated with a passing out parade in dress uniforms in front of their families and guests. After 1977, recruit training was followed by a parachute course.

Recruits were assigned to a colour-coded squad (green, blue, red and yellow) at the start of their training, and stayed with it throughout the course. When they passed out, the recruits in each squad were generally put into the same Commando, so that men from red squad went into 1 Cdo, while men from green squad went to 3 Cdo. This ensured that recruits would not be completely without friends in their new Commando.

Newly trained troopers – known crudely as ‘Fresh Poes’ – usually had to prove themselves on operations before they were fully accepted into the unit. Ideally, only one rookie was assigned to a four-man stick, but this was not always possible.

Training continued once the soldier had passed out, both as refresher training within the unit and in the form of specialist courses (for example, 12-week courses for signallers or medics) and on promotion (for example, the 10-week platoon drill and weapons instructor’s course for prospective sergeants).

Officer training

The RLI’s original officer cadre went through British Army training at Sandhurst, and some had experience of counter-insurgency warfare during the Malayan Emergency (1948–60). However, following the UDI, Rhodesia had to train its own officers.

Recruits completed an intelligence test during their induction, and those who scored highly were sent for officer selection, along with NCOs who demonstrated leadership qualities on operations. Promotion from the ranks was unusually common in the Rhodesian Army, though such men would not necessarily serve as officers in their original battalion.

Officer selection consisted of several days of team command tasks, comprising tests of leadership and initiative (such as getting a heavy barrel across obstacles using planks and rope), interspersed with runs, endurance marches and presentations on randomly assigned subjects. Typically, well over half the candidates failed the selection course, and were returned to their units. Those who succeeded began a 12-month course at the School of Infantry at Gwelo.

The course was divided into four main phases. The first three-month phase covered drill and support

An RLI stick fords the Maura River during Operation Cauldron in 1968. (RLI Regimental Association)



weapons. The second phase covered conventional warfare, and the third covered counter-insurgency warfare skills, such as patrolling and setting ambushes. A final phase covered administration, military law and other subjects, including trips to South Africa to study tanks and other equipment unavailable in Rhodesia. Training involved control of troops during exercises, as well as academic and field studies.

New officers were usually assigned an experienced NCO as their troop sergeant, and served a short apprenticeship as a rifleman in a stick to ensure familiarity with unit operating procedures before taking command of a troop.

National Service officers went through a similar selection process, but did an abbreviated 18-week training course. However, postings to the RLI were sought-after appointments, and relatively few went to National Service officers.

UNIFORMS AND APPEARANCE

The RLI initially wore blue berets and khaki drill shirts as barrack dress, with either long trousers or shorts and hose-tops and puttees. Field wear consisted of dark green denims and floppy bush hats. Between 1965 and 1966 these were replaced by locally produced, four-pocket camouflage combat jackets, matching camouflage trousers with large map pockets on the thighs and a camouflage field cap with a neck curtain for sun protection.

A camouflage shirt with two buttoned breast pockets followed in 1969/70, as many soldiers discarded the jacket in hot weather, exposing the khaki shirts beneath. A one-piece, multi-pocket, camouflaged jump suit was issued after the battalion took on the parachute role.

The camouflage pattern was very effective, but the uniforms themselves were of relatively poor quality, and soldiers often removed the uncomfortable reinforcing patches on the elbows of the jacket, or cut down the sleeves of the shirts.

The black tennis shoes issued for PT ('takkies') or Veldtschoen walking shoes ('vellies') were often worn instead of the issued brown leather boots, except for parachuting. A treadless 'Clandestine' canvas boot, which left minimal tracks, was issued late in the war. All were often worn without socks, since these attracted burrs in the bush.

Troops were supposed to sew Day-Glo marker panels inside their caps, so they could be worn inverted as air recognition markers, but some felt it made them obvious to insurgents on the ground as well. The issue net face veil was used as headgear or a sweat scarf, and for cleaning weapons or picking up hot mess tins.

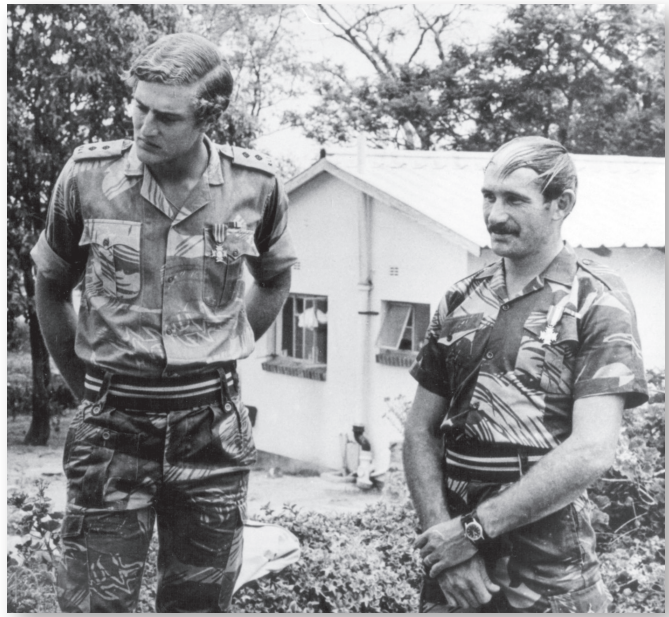
Dress was relaxed during the middle years of the war, with troops operating in shorts and T-shirts. It sometimes veered into eccentricity, with one soldier wearing a bright green 'lucky' tea cosy as a hat and another sporting an old undertaker's top hat with his camouflage face veil wrapped round it and a yellow

RLI soldier Al Tourle with his shooting trophies in 1967, wearing the old-style Khaki uniform. Tourle later died of his wounds after being mauled by a lion, a reminder of the more unusual threats faced by Rhodesian troops in the bush. (RLI Regimental Association)





LEFT
On the drill square, in dress greens. The peaked 'bus conductor' caps were replaced by berets when the RLI became a commando battalion. (RLI Regimental Association)



RIGHT
Lieutenant Rick Passapourtis and Sergeant Pete McNeillage in pressed fatigues and regimental stable belts for a medal presentation. (RLI Regimental Association)

AA badge on the front. Things tightened up in the final years, with shorts replaced by long trousers, while the orders for some external operations specified that only Rhodesian camouflage should be worn.

White skin was usually dulled down with camouflage cream after 1976, though faces were sometimes left white on externals, for quick recognition. During the cold months, troops wore green British-style 'woolly pully' sweaters with reinforcing patches on shoulders and elbows, old-fashioned greatcoats and balaclavas, the latter often worn rolled on the head like watch caps. Nylon ponchos were used in wet weather, or to build shelters in the field.

Troopers could grow their hair somewhat after completing training, and moustaches were acceptable, but (then-fashionable) sideburns were banned. Since every drop of water had to be carried on foot patrols in the bush, it was often too scarce to use for washing or shaving when away from bases.

Rank insignia followed British patterns, with the original large insignia being replaced by smaller subdued insignia late in the war. Troops often wrote their blood group on their shirts in marker pen.

When in base, the camouflage fatigues were worn with beret and stable belt in the green and silver regimental colours. Tartan green dress uniforms ('No. 1 Dress') were worn for public ceremonies. They were initially worn with peaked caps (mocked for resembling bus driver caps) until the latter were replaced by the green commando beret in 1964.

Webbing was initially British 1944 pattern, replaced by several locally made patterns and even captured guerrilla webbing, including Chinese-style chest rigs. Much of the kit was poorly made, and men envied former British or American soldiers who brought their better-made foreign kit with them. Some men wore privately purchased 'fireforce vests', with pockets for magazines, grenades and water, made by a Salisbury department store.

Body armour was rarely available in Rhodesia, and was generally only worn by helicopter crews. Even the steel helmets issued were rarely worn, as they impeded efficiency in the bush while offering little protection against gunshot wounds.

WEAPONS AND EQUIPMENT

The RLI was formed with the standard British weapons of the time, the newly adopted 7.62mm L1A1 Self-Loading Rifle (SLR) and the World War II-era Bren light machine gun. After the UDI, Britain initiated economic sanctions, expecting these to bring Rhodesia to its knees in short order. Though they failed in that respect, they did restrict purchases of military equipment, including small arms.

From 1966, the original British weapons were replaced by Belgian Fabrique Nationale (FN) FAL rifles and MAG machine guns. The FN FAL was very similar to the SLR, but had a selective fire capability. The recoil was difficult to control on fully automatic. Most found it accurate, reliable and hard-hitting, if heavy at 4.5kg (9.9lb). Riflemen usually carried 5 or 6 20-round magazines on fireforce operations, but more (up to 12 magazines) would be carried for camp attacks. FAL stood for *Fusil Automatique Léger* or Light Automatic Rifle; it was usually called the 'FN rifle'. Many were actually South African-made R1 copies. Similarly, many guerrilla 'AK47s' were actually Chinese Type 56 copies.

A few heavy barrel support versions of the FN FAL were purchased, but they were rather heavy for rifles, without delivering the firepower of a MAG. These were provided with bipods and 30-round magazines. The latter could be used in the standard FN rifle, but some found them unreliable, and their length made firing from a prone position awkward.

Each four-man stick included an FN MAG (pronounced 'em-ay-gee' rather than 'mag') machine gun. MAG stood for *Mitrailleuse d'Appui Général* or General Purpose Machine Gun. The same weapon was used by Britain as the GPMG, and by the US as the M240. The MAG could be mounted on a tripod for sustained fire, but was generally used either from a bipod or from the hip, using the folded bipod as a front handgrip and a broad carrying strap to help support the weight of the weapon. It fed from 50-round belts; these could be linked together, but the shorter belts were less likely to tangle in brush or when firing on the move. Spare belts were normally carried in pouches, since belts draped around the body picked up dirt and could reveal the gunner's position by glinting or clinking. The MAG weighed 11.8kg (26lb), plus another 15kg (33lb) for a typical ammunition



An FN rifle with the early wooden butt (above). Note the grenade sight folded down above the hand guard, and the camouflage paint scheme. Below it is a Browning Hi-Power pistol, and a folding stock version of the AK47 used by the guerrillas. (Author's collection)



John van Zyl, with a MAG machine gun, after a fireforce contact. (RLI Regimental Association)

load of 500 rounds. As a result, while the gunner carried most of the ammunition, each man in the stick carried a belt or two. Spare quick-change barrels were available for sustained fire, but were rarely carried.

Both the FN rifle and the MAG fired the 7.62 x 51mm NATO cartridge, a powerful round that could easily penetrate trees and other cover. Slings and carrying handles were generally removed from rifles to avoid snagging while moving through brush, and both weapons were commonly camouflaged with paint in the latter part of the war.

Paratroopers were issued a 9mm pistol (usually a Browning Hi-Power or Star automatic) so they could defend themselves immediately, before getting out of their parachute harness. The Star held 8 rounds, while the Browning held 13. Some trackers were issued with Browning semi-automatic shotguns, but these proved less successful than the standard FN rifle.

Infantrymen commonly carried between two and four fragmentation grenades and one or two white phosphorous (WP) or coloured smoke grenades. The first fragmentation grenades were British No. 36 (Mills) grenades, later replaced by the South African M962, a copy of the American Mk II 'pineapple' grenade. The average soldier could throw either grenade about 25–30m, and they had a notional blast radius (i.e. the range in which half the personnel will become casualties) of about 10–15m. However, some fragments carried much further, so the user was well advised to take cover after throwing one.

White phosphorous grenades were initially the British No. 80, and later the South African M970; both produced dense white smoke to provide cover and mark positions for aircraft. They could also be used offensively, since they scattered burning white phosphorous fragments over their 15m burst radius. These fragments were almost impossible to wipe off or extinguish before they burned down to bone.

Locally produced 'bunker bombs' might be carried during external 'camp attack' operations. These were lengths of plastic pipe or old grenade packing tubes filled with explosive and fitted with a grenade fuse at one end. Tossed through a firing slit, they would collapse the entire bunker, killing the occupants.

High-explosive and anti-tank rifle grenades allowed targets to be engaged beyond throwing distance. They slipped over the muzzle of an FN rifle, and were launched out to 150m using ballistite cartridges; men carried one or two of these special cartridges in a shirt pocket or in used machine-gun belt links attached to their dog tags. A more powerful ballistite cartridge was available, and sent grenades out to 400m, but the greater recoil meant that it had to be fired indirectly, with the weapon's butt under the arm.

The first anti-tank weapon was the 3.5in. rocket launcher (the American-designed M20 'Super Bazooka'). It was 1.52m (60in.) long, and although it hinged in half for transport, it remained a bulky package. The launcher weighed 7kg (15.4lb), plus another 12kg (26.5lb) for 3 rockets. It could penetrate up to 25cm (10in.) of steel armour or 90cm (3ft) of sandbags out to 300m, but produced a significant backblast when fired, which could endanger personnel immediately behind. It was not usually carried on



A 3.5in. rocket launcher. Although dated and seldom taken into the field, these remained the standard anti-tank weapon until replaced by captured RPGs from 1978. (RLI Regimental Association)

operations, as there was rarely an armoured threat, and scarcity of rockets for practice meant few men were actually trained to fire it. The 3.5in. was replaced from 1978 with captured RPG-7 rocket launchers, which had similar weight and performance.

Claymore directional mines were used in ambushes, or to defend fixed locations like fireforce bases. Each contained a slab of plastic explosive with hundreds of ball bearings embedded in the front face. When set off by a tripwire, or by a remote detonator, the explosive blasted the ball bearings outward in a lethal 60-degree fan, shredding anybody within 50m or so to the front of the mine.

Communications

Communications were vital to coordinate sub-units in dense brush. Within each four-man stick, commands were given verbally, or by simple hand signals for quietness.

Each stick leader carried a VHF radio (an A60 until 1970, then the A63 and finally an A76) to communicate with the orbiting K-car and other sticks; the handset was generally taped to the shoulder harness of his webbing. A second radio was added in each stick after 1979. A larger HF backpack radio was carried when a longer range set was needed. This was the TR28 until 1970, then the TR48. Both could send Morse or voice transmissions.

The smaller radios used disposable batteries and standard practice was to carry a fresh battery in the radio and a sealed spare. The backpack sets used rechargeable batteries. In the event of a radio malfunction, the stick would lay out a Day-Glo panel or even the white backing of a map to indicate the problem; the K-Car carried a spare FN rifle and a spare radio to replace any that failed or were damaged during an operation.

Radio communications were in clear (unencrypted) using simple voice procedure, with sensitive information

Lieutenant Joe du Plooy; note the radio handset clipped to his webbing. Du Plooy was killed in the helicopter crash during Operation Uric in 1979. (RLI Regimental Association)





A 3 Cdo stick in the Zambezi valley. The soldier on the right holds a captured SKS rifle, while the man kneeling in front of him appears to be armed with the heavy barrel version of the FN. (RLI Regimental Association)

such as map references given via simple shackle codes, which changed daily.

Other equipment

Stick leaders would normally carry a map, compass and notebook, plus mini-flares and coloured smoke grenades to mark the position of their stick for extraction or when air strikes were being called in. They might also carry Icarus parachute flare rockets for illumination.

Troops on fireforce contacts were generally fairly lightly equipped, with webbing, ammunition and grenades plus at least two water bottles. Ponchos and sleeping bags were carried if the troops thought they might be out overnight. Each stick would normally have at least one panga (machete) to clear bush to create a helicopter landing zone (LZ).

Cigarettes and matches were generally sealed in plastic bags, to prevent them becoming soaked by rain or sweat and thus hard to light. Some troops carried part of a ration pack, and a small stove to make a brew of tea. Loads on external operations could be punishingly heavy, since the troops had to carry extra ammunition, spare radio batteries, water and rations.

Vehicles

The RLI initially used Land Rovers and Bedford RL/RM trucks, supplemented by Ford F250/150 1½ ton pickup trucks in the mortar platoon; these were eventually replaced by Mercedes 2.5 Unimogs and 4.5-ton trucks after 1974. However, since only the main roads were paved, laying landmines to catch military or civilian vehicles became a standard guerrilla tactic.

Countermeasures included filling tyres with water, which made the steering extremely heavy but absorbed some of the energy of an explosion, and flooring vehicles with sandbags and heavy rubber-covered conveyor belting.



A Crocodile armoured personnel carrier; the shaped plates were intended to deflect mine blasts. The Lynx behind is being armed with Frantan (Napalm). (RLI Regimental Association)

Passengers were not supposed to travel in the cab of trucks, since this was likely to bear the main force of an explosion, and passengers in the back maintained all-round security with their personal weapons, in case of ambush.

Ultimately, these improvised armoured trucks were replaced with Crocodile troop-carrying vehicles (TCVs) based on Nissan or Isuzu truck chassis with V-shaped sloped armour on the underbody to deflect mine blasts, plus armoured sides and bullet-resistant windscreens to improve ambush survivability.

Helicopters

Given the large areas to be covered, helicopter mobility was vital to allow the limited number of troops available to react to guerrilla activities and sightings. The primary helicopter was the French-designed Aérospatiale Alouette III. The Alouette ('Lark') was the first helicopter with a jet turbine (rather than a piston) engine, improving power and decreasing the maintenance required.

The basic troop-carrying version was known as a G-car, and could initially carry five infantrymen, but this dropped to four after 1967–68 when the helicopters were upgraded with heavier armament and armour to protect the pilot. As well as the pilot, each helicopter was crewed by an air force gunner/technician who operated the machine gun mounted in the aircraft's door and did much of the maintenance on the ground. The original armament was a single MAG, but this was later replaced by twin .303 Brownings. Both types were fitted with case catcher bags, to prevent ejected cases damaging the aircraft, and collimator reflector sights.

After 1974, some Alouettes were converted to command/gunship K-cars. These replaced their troop-carrying capacity with a Matra MG151 20mm cannon firing from the left side of the helicopter, and a third backwards-facing seat and radio equipment for the army fireforce commander. The fragmentation effect from the HE cannon shells meant that rounds did not have to score direct hits to be effective, and pilots were trained to fly tight pylon turns that kept the left side of the helicopter constantly facing the target, allowing the gunner to pour on a deadly stream of fire. Difficulty in obtaining enough 20mm cannons meant that some K-cars were fitted with quad Brownings instead, though many felt these were less effective.



RLI soldiers deploying from an Alouette. Note the shorts worn without camouflage cream, and the single machine gun on the G-car, rather than the later twin mount. (RLI Regimental Association)

An Alouette K-car, showing the 20mm cannon and rear-facing armoured seat for the fireforce commander. (RLI Regimental Association)



Helicopter operations in Rhodesia were often difficult, since high temperatures and altitude meant thinner air, reducing performance. The aircraft often operated near their performance limits when fully loaded, and pilots had to cope with cramped landing zones and make drop offs against hillsides or in close bush. Troops were usually dropped off from a low hover, without landing, to avoid damage to the helicopter's underbody from rocks or stumps. The little Alouettes could get into very small clearings, but sometimes an LZ had to be created or enlarged. Light bush was hacked away with machetes, while larger trees were removed using the 'FN chainsaw', placing the muzzle of a weapon close to the trunk and firing a short burst to shred it.

Conditions aboard the helicopters were very noisy; the stick commander wore a headset to talk to the crew, but it was difficult to communicate with the rest of his stick in the air.

The Rhodesians obtained a limited number of Agusta-Bell 205s (a copy of the famous UH-1 Huey) in 1978. These arrived in poor condition, and required full rebuilds. However, these 'Cheetahs' were significantly faster than the Alouette, and could carry two sticks of infantry each.

The Rhodesian Air Force helicopter crews (known to the troops as 'blue jobs') lived on the same fireforce bases as the troops, though they had their own (notably good) mess facilities. Most received a good deal of respect from the soldiers, for their skill and calmness under fire. Some of the Alouettes and their crews were provided by South Africa, until these were withdrawn to pressurise the Rhodesian government. Helicopter technicians carried FN rifles, while pilots were issued pistols, but often carried Uzi sub-machine guns or captured AK47s in case they had to put down in the bush.

Parachuting

The RLI began parachuting troops from World War II-era DC-3 Dakotas in 1976 as a way to deploy more men on a fireforce operation than could be carried in the limited number of helicopters available. Each Dakota could



Paratroopers from 2 Cdo about to board their Dakota. Note the steel airborne helmets, and the masking tape sealing muzzles of weapons and securing the bipod legs of the MAG. (RLI Regimental Association)

carry between 20 and 24 paratroopers, though this reduced to 16 in 1978 when countermeasures against heat-seeking missiles were added.

All RLI troopers were parachute-trained from 1977; operational personnel who were not willing to become parachute-qualified were transferred out to other units. The two-week jump school included eight parachute jumps, one of them at night. It took place either at New Sarum airfield near Salisbury, or the South African Army parachute school near Bloemfontein.

Unlike the large-scale paratroop operations of World War II, where the paratroopers were dropped onto safe landing zones some distance from their objectives, and had time to form up as units before going into action, Rhodesian paratroopers had to drop into unfavourable terrain – often rocky or wooded – in close proximity to the enemy.

Rifles and MAG machine guns were carried strapped to the man rather than in leg bags so they could be brought into action quickly. Muzzles were sealed with masking tape to prevent them getting clogged with dirt in a rough landing. Paratroopers were also issued 9mm pistols, in case they needed to defend themselves immediately on landing, or if ‘hung up’ in a tree; these were often carried tucked under the reserve pack for quick access, rather than in a holster, and secured to a lanyard around the neck.

Paratroopers generally wore brown leather combat boots, which gave more ankle support than takkies or Veldtschoen. The Rhodesians had some British airborne-pattern steel helmets, but many paratroopers wore locally sourced motorcycle crash helmets; these were discarded on landing, as they blocked hearing and offered no ballistic protection.

Each man checked his own gear, then checked the man in front of him; the dispatcher aboard the aircraft gave them a final check immediately before jumping. Most operational jumps were made from relatively low altitude (500ft or less) to minimise the time descending paratroopers were vulnerable to ground fire; from that height a paratrooper would be in the air for 20 seconds or less, as the parachute took 180ft to deploy. Even so, men

RLI paratroopers aboard a DC-3 Dakota, their static lines clipped to the steel cables running the length of the fuselage. The 'motorbike' helmets were replaced with airborne steel helmets later. (RLI Regimental Association)



sometimes found bullet holes in their parachutes. Occasionally, paratroopers were accidentally dropped too low, resulting in injuries. Jumps were normally made using a static line attached to the aircraft to open the parachute, rather than a manual ripcord. Although paratroopers wore a smaller reserve chute across their chests in case their main parachute failed, the low altitude made it difficult to deploy this before hitting the ground.

The standard parachute was a non-steerable round canopy, though the parachutist could control his direction to some extent by pulling on the lift webs connecting his harness to the parachute rigging lines. Since parachutes were scarce in sanction-strapped Rhodesia, they were carefully recovered after a drop, to be repacked and used again; 'Waster' sticks might even be dropped specifically to do this.

It was vital that troops left the aircraft as quickly as possible, to minimise dispersion on landing; given the Dakota's airspeed, one trooper jumping every second would mean the men landing 50m apart, too far to link up quickly and support each other. Troops practised rapid exits and crowded next to each other ready for the green light, so that an entire planeload of 16–20 men could exit the aircraft in 10–12 seconds.

On some externals, paratroopers jumped with CSPEP (Carrying Straps Personal Equipment Parachutist) containers weighing up to 50kg (110lb)



FLIGHT LINE SCRAMBLE, 1978

When the alert siren sounded, heliborne infantryman grabbed their webbing and weapons, which were kept ready packed and near at hand, and headed for their helicopters. Camouflage cream was put on at the last minute, since it made skin greasy and could run into the eyes as the wearer sweated. The K-car pilot and fireforce commander would develop a quick plan, and could be in the air within moments. The officer (1) wears the camouflage fatigues with RLI stable belt and beret, an outfit commonly worn in barracks and as walking out dress. Although the helicopter crew wore body armour, it was too heavy and bulky for general use by infantry. The pilot (2) carries an Uzi sub-machine gun; it was covered in RLI training, but rarely used, as the standard FN rifle had better range, accuracy and penetration. The troop carrying G-car (3) has a door mount for twin .303 Brownings, but the K-car (4) replaces the troop capacity with a rear-facing seat for the army fireforce commander, extra radio gear and an MG151 20mm cannon.



3

4

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attached, containing support weapons, extra ammunition, rations or water. These detached once the parachute deployed, hanging below the parachutist on a short line so they hit the ground before he did, but made jumps more difficult.

Each troop rotated between the paratroop, heliborne infantry and land tail roles during bush trips, but some men still made extremely high numbers of jumps; one RLI corporal completed 73 operational jumps during his 4-year service.

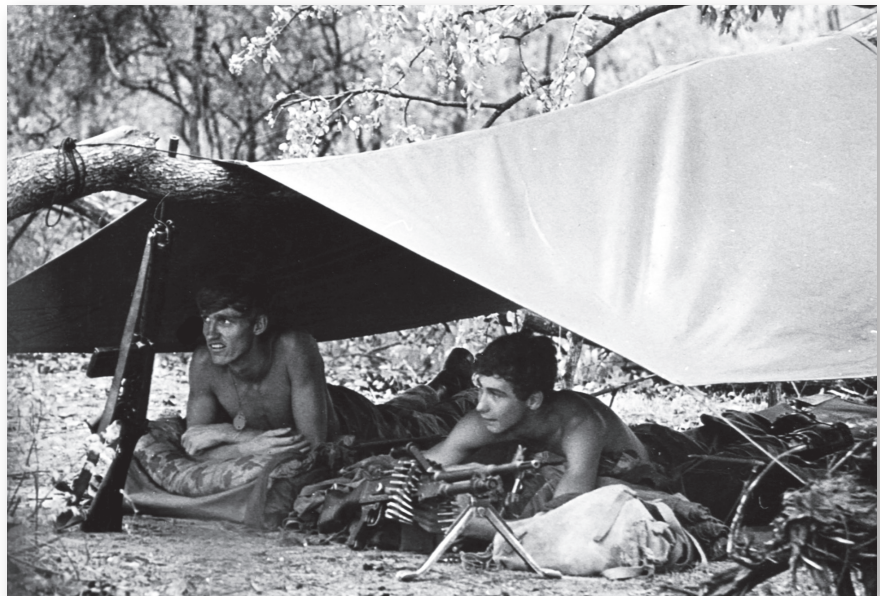
CONDITIONS OF SERVICE

Food and accommodation

Brady Barracks in Bulawayo, where the RLI was initially raised, was an old wartime RAF training base in poor condition, which did little for morale in the regiment's difficult first year.

In 1962, the RLI moved to Cranborne Barracks, Salisbury. This was a modern facility constructed to a high standard, with playing fields, tennis courts, swimming pools and a gymnasium. Each Commando had its own block in the barracks, including an armoury, stores, canteen and recreation room with snooker tables and a bar. A dozen or so men shared a barrack room, and were responsible for keeping it clean and tidy. Each man had two steel lockers for uniforms and personal effects, one either side of his bed, plus a smaller footlocker.

Although some HQ elements and Training Troop remained at Cranborne throughout the war, individual Commandos were deployed on a succession of 'bush trips', based at Forward Air Field or fireforce bases. The short range of the Alouette helicopters and the need to minimise flight time responding to contacts meant that the location of these bases shifted with the tactical situation, and while the major bases became permanently established, others were used only briefly.



Two troopers rest in their bivvy in the Zambezi valley, 1968. (RLI Regimental Association)



Not every call-out ended with a contact. Here 2 Cdo paratroopers stand down without jumping, showing how packs could be secured below the reserve parachute during the jump. (RLI Regimental Association)

The key requirement for a fireforce base was sufficient flat ground for the airstrip, and a source of fresh water. Each fireforce base was surrounded by barbed wire and a cleared fire zone extending well away from the perimeter. The perimeter itself consisted of earth revetments, complete with bunkers and machine-gun positions. Blast berms of earth-filled fuel drums protected aircraft and key areas within the base from mortar attacks, and most bases had emplaced mortars of their own to return fire or launch illuminating rounds. In fact, attacks on fireforce bases were very rare, though the Grand Reef base was attacked by ZANLA guerrillas with rockets and mortars just before Christmas 1977.

Most bases had relatively austere accommodation in tents or wooden huts with corrugated asbestos roofs. The main camps had brick-built ablutions blocks with showers, but at the smaller camps, men had to make do with cleaning up under bucket showers or in tin baths. Sanitation consisted of 'desert lily' urinal tubes sunk into the ground and communal 'long drop' earth closets, carefully sited downwind and away from the mess tent, since they attracted plagues of flies in hot weather. The contents were topped off with petrol and burnt every week or so to control the smell and flies; this went spectacularly wrong at one camp, when the soldier assigned mistakenly used half a jerrycan of petrol, rather than the half-pint recommended; the detonation blew the roof off the lavatory and rained excrement on the entire camp.

Given the high operational tempo of fireforce operations, each troop had a black batman who looked after laundry, ironing and other small chores for the troops. Batmen ate the same food as the soldiers and were paid out of Commando funds, supplemented by tips from the troops.

Food was so poor in the very early days that it led to protests, but things improved and food in barracks or on base was generally good during the bush war. Breakfast was cereal, bacon and eggs, while lunch was generally soup followed by a meat-and-vegetable dish and steamed pudding or tinned fruit and custard. Supper was a light meal, such as a pie. Some men believed that the army put Bluestone (copper sulphate) in the tea as a libido suppressant.

Units sometimes received especially good meals – including steaks, fresh strawberries and ice cream – as a reward for good performance, or after returning from a successful external operation.

Officers, sergeants and corporals each had their own messes at Cranborne, with subscriptions that funded extras, but in the field, officers and senior NCOs ate together, while corporals messed with the troopers. The latter were allowed to purchase two bottles of beer an evening from a canteen truck which also sold cold Cokes, Fanta and cigarettes. The canteen did not sell spirits, but some troops smuggled bottles illicitly in their kit.

For operations away from base, troops were issued 24-hour ration packs – small cardboard boxes which came in several menus. These varied somewhat through the period, but generally contained a packet of breakfast cereal, one of several main meal tins (corned beef, chopped ham, beans and frankfurters, tinned pilchards and so on), a packet of either rice or mashed potato, a small tin of fruit (usually orange segments) and hardtack ‘dog biscuits’. The latter were difficult to eat dry, but could be soaked or crushed and added to other dishes, or spread with jam, margarine or processed cheese from a small foil tube. An accessory pack contained candy-coated peanuts, toilet paper, matches and sachets of tea, coffee, powdered milk and curry powder.

In the early border control days, units patrolling the bush sometimes shot game for the pot or bought chickens from the local inhabitants to supplement their rations. Troopers sometimes took small camping gas stoves into the field to heat rations, improvised a stove from an empty tin or even built a small campfire. Often, however, rations had to be eaten cold, since smoke or cooking odours would give away a unit’s position.

Water was vital in the hot conditions, and since it was often contaminated (leading to the dreaded ‘Gyppo guts’) or simply non-existent in the operational areas, troops carried at least two water bottles, and several more for long patrols or external operations. Troops often found that their Bergen rucksacks were so packed with ammunition and water that there was little space for food, so ration packs were broken up and troops took only the components they liked, with unwanted items going into a communal pile for anyone to help themselves.

Rest and recreation

Troops spent the time between fireforce sorties maintaining equipment, doing tasks around the base or on refresher training, especially on first aid, though

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‘STAND UP, HOOK UP’ – A PARACHUTE DROP

RLI paratroopers dropped from low altitude (around 500ft) and made more operational jumps than any unit in history, with some men making two or three operational jumps in a single day. They used both a main parachute on the back, and a smaller reserve on the front, though given the low altitude they jumped from, it would have been hard for the parachutist to get rid of his main chute and deploy the reserve before he hit the ground. Parachutes were opened by static lines which clipped onto the steel cables running the length of the aircraft and pulled the parachute open automatically as the jumper fell away from the aircraft; this gave a faster opening than a manual ripcord system, and could thus be used to drop from lower heights. As they often dropped almost on top of the enemy, RLI paratroopers had to land ready to fight as quickly as possible, and jumped with weapons strapped to their bodies rather than in drop bags. Rapid exit was critical – the less time between the first and last man leaving the aircraft, the less the stick would be dispersed when they landed, and the quicker they could link up and become an effective unit. Paratroopers crowded together next to the door and practised fast exits, so a whole planeload of men would go out like a train, clearing the single door in only 10–12 seconds.





Two troopers catch up on their reading. (RLI Regimental Association)

Charly Greenwood, Brendan Inglis and Dutchie Snyman return to Mount Darwin after a fireforce call-out in 1979. By this point, sticks sometimes carried a second MAG for extra firepower. (Alan Strachan)



this tailed off in the final years of the war due to the sheer volume of contacts. Morning PT and evening runs maintained fitness, though the latter might be cancelled if the troops had been in a contact.

When they had time off during the day, troops relaxed by reading paperbacks and newspapers, playing cards, writing letters or listening to music on cassette tapes or the radio; Sally Donaldson's 'Forces Requests' was a special favourite. Volleyball games were common, since they could be dropped quickly if the alert siren sounded. Teams were often one troop against another, or Rhodesians versus 'foreigners'.

Since Rhodesian helicopters lacked night-flying instrumentation, most troopers'

evenings at a fireforce base were their own, unless they were assigned to guard duty or radio watch. Some fireforce bases were near towns – Grand Reef, for example, was only a few miles from Umtali, and troopers who could get a pass could go into town – but others were more isolated and troops spent evenings sitting round the fire, chatting and drinking. Movies were regularly arranged in the evenings, including 'blue movies'. As a special treat, units sometimes got live acts from one of the towns, including live music and (very occasionally) strippers.

As well as the limited beer ration, troops smoking *dagga* (marijuana) found on killed or captured insurgents, or bought from the batmen, was unofficially tolerated. A few developed harder drug habits, using tranquillisers or painkillers begged, bought or stolen from the Commando medic's drug chest.

Bush trips generally lasted five or six weeks, before the Commando returned to Cranborne Barracks. Vehicles were unloaded, weapons were cleaned and handed in to the armoury and the troops were assembled for pay parade and a ritual admonishment about the need for good behaviour on leave. They were then unleashed on Salisbury for 7 to 10 days of rest and relaxation, with their back pay burning holes in their pockets.

The RLI swiftly became known for hell-raising behaviour off duty, with heavy drinking and alcoholic brawls that sometimes escalated into full-on fights with the police. Those arrested usually spent the rest of their leave in jail; with the manpower shortage, they were inevitably released back to the battalion for the start of their next bush trip, though any fines would be docked from their pay.

Troops could live in barracks during their R&R, but the regimentation and

lack of privacy meant some regulars chose to receive a living-out allowance and rented houses in Salisbury, shared between men from various Commandos. Since only one Commando was generally on leave at a time, this allowed men to have their own apartment during R&R at relatively low cost.

Pay

With additional allowances such as bush pay, a regular trooper earned around R\$340 per month in 1976 – not a fortune, but a decent salary given that food and accommodation was provided. (Rhodesia used the Rhodesian Pound until 1970, and then the Rhodesian dollar. In 1976, R\$1 was roughly the equivalent of £1 sterling or US\$1.60.) National Servicemen were paid significantly less, receiving around R\$110 per month after tax, and were less likely to get specialist courses qualifying them for additional allowances and proficiency pay.

Table 2: pay scales					
Rank	Age/Year	Basic pay per month	Rank	Year	Basic pay per month
Boy	16.5	129.00	Officer cadet	Fixed	215.00
	17	138.75	Second lieutenant	1	274.25
Private	1	191.50		2	285.00
	2	201.25		3	295.75
	3	211.00	Lieutenant	1	360.25
	4	220.50		2	371.00
	5	230.25		3	381.75
Corporal	1	239.75		4	392.50
	2	249.50		5	403.25
	3	259.25		6	414.00
	4	269.00		7	424.75
Sergeant	1	301.00	Captain	1	505.25
	2	311.75		2	516.00
	3	322.50		3	526.75
	4	333.25		4	537.50
	5	344.00		5	548.25
Colour-sergeant	1	354.75		6	559.00
	2	365.50	Major	1	612.75
	3	376.25		2	623.50
	4	387.00		3	634.25
WO2 (Warrant officers)	1	397.75		4	645.00
	2	408.50		5	655.75
	3	419.25		6	666.50
	4	430.00		7	677.25
	5	440.75			

Table 2 shows the Rhodesian Army General Service rates as at 1975; members of the RLI, SAS and Selous Scouts ranking as WO2 or lower received an additional R\$45 per month special unit allowance after completing basic training. Privates and corporals could receive additional allowances based on their military efficiency and skills, measured in ‘stars’. A one-star soldier earned an extra R\$15 per month, while a soldier with the maximum six stars earned an extra R\$50 per month.



The Commanding Officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Dave ('The King') Parker inspects the RLI on parade as they receive the freedom of the city of Salisbury. Parker died in a helicopter accident in 1975. (RLI Regimental Association)

Until replaced by electronic transfer in 1976, men were paid in cash at pay parade, a weekly ritual where each man in turn marched in, saluted, received and signed for his pay, saluted again and marched out. They received a small amount to cover cigarettes, drinks and the like at the end of each week, then the balance as 'big pay' at the end of the month.

Although beer and soft drinks purchased were charged to a trooper's canteen account and deducted from his pay, there was little to spend money on in camp. Troopers often received a decent amount when they returned from a bush trip, although many would have blown the lot by the time they returned from R&R. Troops often found

money when searching dead or captured guerrillas for documents. Since guerrilla section commanders were often issued funds to purchase supplies before they infiltrated into Rhodesia, this could be a significant windfall for a lucky trooper.

Attacks on ZANLA base camps in Mozambique captured significant amounts of war materiel, and individuals could sometimes pick up souvenirs or valuable items for themselves. One man found a briefcase full of cash abandoned by a ZANLA paymaster during Operation Dingo, which 'went to funding a huge party for all the RLI troopies on the operation' (Pringle 2013, p. 207) while another 'scored a fancy Otis watch' (Adams and Cocks 2013, p. 194). Often, however, the returning troops were met by Special Branch officers who attempted to confiscate such loot, which went down badly with the front-line troops.

Discipline and punishment

As a regular unit, RLI soldiers were under tighter discipline than the territorial soldiers who made up much of the Rhodesian Army. Discipline in the field was far less rigid than during training; how a man performed in action was more important than his appearance or demeanour. However, some disciplinary problems inevitably occurred.

The simplest punishment was to assign the miscreant extra duties, or especially unpleasant ones, such as digging new latrine pits or burning the contents of old ones. Privileges (such as the beer ration) could be rescinded, or a soldier's pay could be docked as a fine. Alternatively, a man could be confined to barracks instead of getting leave at the end of a bush trip; one soldier lost three consecutive R&Rs, serving 198 days without leave, but this was exceptional.

For more serious derelictions, such as negligent discharge of a weapon, a soldier

Boetie Pennekan, 3 Cdo MAG gunner. Note the later twin Browning MG mount of this G-car. (RLI Regimental Association)



could be sentenced to (usually) 14 or 28 days at the detention barracks (DB) in Bulawayo, where they were put through a strict regime of PT, drill and inspections which was both boring and exhausting. To add insult to injury, time spent in DB was not counted towards completion of a National Serviceman's military obligation, pushing back his discharge date by the time served.

ON CAMPAIGN

From formation to UDI (1960–65)

The formation of No. 1 Training Unit was a difficult process, without enough instructors or a stable cadre of NCOs to build the unit around. The unit suffered from poor discipline and desertions as men decided that army life was not for them. This was not helped by agents of the rebel Katanga government setting up an office near the barracks recruiting mercenaries to fight in the Congo, on very generous terms. Things slowly stabilised, and in February 1961 the unit became 1st Battalion, The Rhodesian Light Infantry.

The RLI's first deployment was to the border between Northern Rhodesia (later Zambia) and the Congo, to prevent the civil war there spilling over into the federation, and to control the exodus of refugees. The troops had completed only basic training and lacked field experience, while one company commander recalls the only map available being a tourist road map bought from a petrol station. Fortunately, no serious incidents occurred, though one man was killed by an accidental discharge, and the deployment provided valuable field experience for the unit. In a taste of things to come, the battalion also provided 'aid to the civil power', performing riot control duty during unrest in the black districts of Salisbury.

When the federation dissolved in December 1963, Rhodesian soldiers in the Federal Army had the option of continuing with the Rhodesian Army, or leaving with a generous cash settlement. More than half the RLI's soldiers chose the latter, leaving it significantly under strength with only around 150 men.

The battalion was brought slowly back to strength, and upgraded to Commando status between 1964 and 1965, culminating in a demanding series of training exercises (Long Drag and Flick Knife) against 'enemy' forces provided by the SAS and RAR.

On a lighter note, the battalion increased its public profile with well-received silent drill displays at a number of events, including one in South Africa dressed as toy soldiers.

When UDI was declared in November 1965, key points were secured against potential British military response. The RLI were regarded as the most dependably pro-UDI unit, and indeed knowledge of their support may have given Ian Smith the confidence to declare independence. They were deployed to

A very clean No. 1 Training Unit Bren gun team. This photo was used on an early recruitment poster. (RLI Regimental Association)



defend New Sarum and Thornhill airbases, the bridges over the Zambezi and the Kariba Dam, which provided much of Rhodesia's electricity. Although not expected to defeat a determined British assault, forcing the British to fight rather than take over unopposed was seen as a significant psychological barrier. In the event, Britain never seriously contemplated military action, despite shrill demands from some of Rhodesia's neighbours.

Border control operations (1965–72)

To this point, the RLI had been part of a peacetime army. This changed in April 1966 with the 'Battle' of Sinoia, when a group of ZANLA guerrillas were detected and engaged by the British South African Police (BSAP), supported by air force helicopters and an RLI officer and sergeant-major who fortunately happened to be passing. (The BSAP were the Rhodesian civil police force and had no link to South Africa; their name came from Cecil Rhodes' British South Africa Company.)

Police insistence that they had sole responsibility for internal security led to them deploying part-time police reservists dressed in conspicuous blue uniforms and armed with obsolete Lee-Enfield rifles against well-equipped guerrillas, rather than asking for army assistance. Although the enemy were eliminated without loss to the police – largely due to the intervention of the RLI men who shot a guerrilla about to throw a grenade into a cluster of policemen bunched around their first 'kill' – the action marked the beginning of the Second Chimurenga, as the nationalists termed the bush war that followed.

Police attempts to retain control of operations led to friction over the following months, with relatively junior policemen trying to give orders to senior army officers, until a proper Joint Operations Command (JOC) system was set up to coordinate police, military and internal affairs activities.

The next few years saw significant incursions, with operations Nickel, Cauldron and their successors accounting for hundreds of the enemy, for relatively few casualties to the security forces. Guerrillas infiltrating into Rhodesia from bases in Zambia did so via the waterless, inhospitable and sparsely inhabited Zambezi valley, and it was there that the RLI concentrated its patrolling activities. Troops were dropped off by vehicle or helicopter for five- to seven-day patrols, looking for any trace of hostile activity. Once found, the patrol called in specialist trackers to follow the spoor until the guerrillas were located, whereupon more troops were helicoptered out to the scene to engage or ambush them. The local black population often fed the security forces information about guerrillas in the vicinity, who demanded food from the locals and were seen by the local chiefs and headmen as threats to their authority.

Initially, the trackers were police or civilian game rangers, but the RLI soon established its own tracking section. Attempts to use dogs were unsuccessful, since they had poor endurance in the heat, and lacked tactical awareness. It was difficult for trackers on foot to make much better

Classical-warfare training in the early days. Note the soon-to-be-discarded helmets, backpack radio and SLR rifles, distinguishable from the later FN by the flash hider. (RLI Regimental Association)



time than the group they were following, so helicopters were sometimes used to leapfrog additional tracker teams ahead, in an attempt to pick up the same tracks closer to source, cutting down the guerrillas' lead.

Guerrilla morale slumped as it became obvious that attempting to enter Rhodesia simply led to death or capture, and the incursions slowed to a trickle by the late 1960s. Ironically, those captured included ZIPRA's chief of operations, who had been sent into the country to find out why previous incursions had been unsuccessful.

Until martial law was declared in 1976, captured guerrillas were regarded as armed criminals, and were tried, convicted and sentenced through the normal legal system. RLI soldiers sometimes had to give evidence at their trials, and at inquests into the deaths of those killed.

With the decline in enemy incursions, troops sometimes slacked off, and some veterans describe patrols using their time in the bush to make biltong (dried game meat) rather than hunting for the enemy. The RLI troops certainly had nothing like the combat experience they would acquire later, and physical training, personal camouflage and noise discipline were much less rigorous in those years.

Early operations in Mozambique

From 1967, small numbers of RLI trackers and officers were temporarily attached to Portuguese units in neighbouring Mozambique as advisers, since victory for the FRELIMO insurgents would make it much easier for guerrillas to infiltrate into Rhodesia. During September 1972, the RLI conducted Operation Sable, a battalion-strength raid against guerrilla camps close to the border. However, several weeks of foot patrolling found only abandoned camps and produced no contacts with the enemy.

Altena Farm to the first ceasefire (1972–75)

Although the nationalists had suffered severe setbacks, they were not defeated. Instead, they adopted a strategy of mobilising and politicising the rural black populations rather than attacking the security forces directly. When the guerrillas did launch new attacks, starting with Altena Farm in 1972, the government was unpleasantly surprised to discover they had built



Vancy Meyers of Support Group, armed with a semi-automatic shotgun, during Operation Griffin, 1968. (RLI Regimental Association)



'Hurry up and wait' has always been part of military life. The troops here are preparing for Operation Sable, 1972. (RLI Regimental Association)



The RLI briefly had a number of World War II-era Staghound armoured cars in preparation for UDI. (RLI Regimental Association)

a significant infrastructure in north-east Rhodesia, and that the real bush war was about to begin.

The government took immediate action to deal with increasing guerrilla activity. National Service was extended, the border was strengthened with a cordon sanitaire minefield, the RAR formed a second battalion and the RLI began to take National Servicemen.

Whether from intimidation or politicisation, rural blacks became much less willing to provide information to the security forces, and patrols rarely made contact with the enemy. Tracking was less useful in populated areas, as the guerrillas' tracks were hard to distinguish

from those of the local inhabitants, and indeed guerrilla bands often arranged for locals to drive cattle across their tracks, obliterating them.

To counter this, the government called Captain Ron Reid-Daly, the former regimental sergeant-major of the RLI, out of retirement to form a specialist unit, the Selous Scouts. The scouts sometimes undertook commando-type strikes, but their primary purpose was to locate guerrillas by maintaining observation posts, and using fake ('pseudo') guerrilla teams made up of selected black soldiers from the RAR and 'turned' former guerrillas to infiltrate the nationalists' support network within Rhodesia.

Rural blacks in threatened areas were moved into secure 'protected villages' where they were immune from intimidation and prevented from supplying the guerrillas with food. Although initially successful, this proved unpopular, since it made it harder for the inhabitants to work their land and separated them from their ancestral graves. Ultimately, the security forces failed to adequately secure the protected villages, so they eventually became stopover points for the guerrillas themselves.

The Rhodesians also experimented with using helicopters (previously seen as too vulnerable for anything beyond observation, transport and casualty evacuation) in more offensive roles; these ideas eventually led to the fireforce concept.

Such measures inflicted significant casualties on the guerrillas, pushing them firmly onto the back foot and reducing ZANLA's forces within Rhodesia to fewer than 100 trained fighters. However, external events intervened. Firstly, the Portuguese revolution in April 1974 led to the collapse of the colonial regime in Mozambique and effectively handed the country over to FRELIMO in June 1975. This allowed ZANLA to base itself in Mozambique, forcing the Rhodesian forces to secure another 1,100km of border. Secondly, the South African government hoped to take pressure off itself by making a deal with the black front-line states over Rhodesia. It applied very strong pressure (including threats to cut off supplies of fuel and munitions) to force the Rhodesian government to agree a ceasefire and release imprisoned black nationalist leaders (including Nkomo and Mugabe) for peace negotiations at the Victoria Falls conference in August 1975. The conference, however, failed to produce results, and the nationalists used the ceasefire to rebuild their

infrastructure and infiltrate more personnel into Rhodesia ready for the next phase of the war. Their prestige was also enhanced among the black population, who believed that the guerrillas, rather than South African pressure, had forced the government to the negotiating table.

Fireforce (1974–79)

Rhodesia was now surrounded by hostile states, making infiltration much easier, while the guerrillas themselves were increasingly numerous and well armed. Even when they could be located, it was very difficult to bag all the guerrillas, as they would generally split up and evade rather than stand and fight.

Given the huge area to be covered, the Rhodesians decided to maximise their use of air mobility, both to react to sightings of guerrillas and to surround them, so that as few as possible escaped. The heliborne fireforce concept was a logical extension of previous quick reaction forces; the key difference was that the aircraft and helicopters were directly attached to infantry units, rather than picking up whatever troops were available on an ad hoc basis.

The first fireforce operation was conducted in 1974, and it quickly became the classic RLI operation, although other units were also used, and the RLI continued to conduct other patrolling operations alongside fireforce duties. After 1978, the RLI were effectively reserved for fireforce operations, in order to derive maximum value from these crack troops.

Fireforce operations evolved over time – operations before 1976 lacked a parachute element, which was added as a way of getting more infantry into the fight than the available helicopters could carry, while double-sized ‘Jumbo’ fireforces were used in some late-war operations. However, the classic fireforce operation involved a K-car command/gunship helicopter, three troop-carrying G-car helicopters, a DC-3 Dakota carrying paratroopers and a Lynx ground-attack aircraft.

Intelligence was central to fireforce call-outs. It came from several sources, including air reconnaissance flights, intelligence from captured guerrillas or even from tracker beacons concealed inside transistor radios left in rural stores that Special Branch thought were likely to be robbed. The best intelligence came from Selous Scouts observation posts (OPs); there was a much lower chance of these call-outs being ‘lemons’, ones that did not lead to contact with the enemy.

The troops were alerted to a call-out by siren. Heliborne troopers immediately pulled on their webbing and headed for their helicopters. Since the Dakota was significantly faster, it took off 10 to 15 minutes after the helicopters, to allow them to get to the scene first. If the Dakota arrived at the scene early, it had to circle in a holding pattern, which caused airsickness and was generally disliked by the troops on board. The paratroopers thus had a little longer to get ready. They headed for the dispersal tent where their parachutes and reserves were laid out, and were helped into their gear by any troops not on standby.

A fireforce could be on its way in less than four minutes, and brief in the air, but experience taught that spending a few minutes extra on planning and



This trooper seems to have acquired a walking stick during a recent fireforce action, presumably as a souvenir. (RLI Regimental Association)

briefing generally paid dividends. If the contact was some distance away, the fireforce might refuel from prepositioned caches en route to maximise time over target, and conduct the briefing while the helicopters refuelled.

Guerrilla groups usually 'bomb-shelled' (scattered) on hearing helicopters, so where possible the fireforce would approach the target area low, and use terrain to mask engine noise. The K-car carrying the fireforce commander was the first aircraft on the scene. Where the call-out was from an OP team, they would provide a talk-on to direct the fireforce to the target. Where possible, the K-car would approach from over the OP, so that the commander saw the terrain from the same perspective and could match locations during the talk-on more easily, although there were sometimes problems with black OP teams whose first language was not English.

If guerrillas were visible, the commander either engaged them with the K-car's cannon, or used the Lynx to deliver air strikes with machine guns, 37mm SNEB rockets or napalm. The latter was known as 'Frantan' locally, as the Rhodesian Air Force had used the cover that they were 'frangible tanks' when developing their napalm drop tanks. The fireforce commander then used the G-cars to deposit their four-man infantry stop groups, closing off the obvious avenues of escape. Sometimes, the G-cars made dummy drop-offs, to make terrorists think that a route was closed even if no troops were actually available to secure it. Finally, the five sticks of paratroopers in the Dakota would be deployed to act as a sweep line, driving the guerrillas into the waiting stop groups, assisted by the aerial firepower of the K-car and Lynx.

When they could be located, the superior weapons and training of the Rhodesians meant they were able to defeat the insurgents, despite usually being outnumbered. Often, however, the troops had to work their way methodically through a large area of bush searching for their enemy, and it might be some time between landing and first contact with the enemy. Since guerrilla groups usually split up, to avoid providing a good target for an air strike, some slipped through the net of stop groups.

The initial heliborne force was followed by a second wave ('Land Tail') in trucks, or sometimes picked up by a second helicopter lift. Although they might arrive too late to take part in the main contact, they would recover the paratroopers and their parachutes, search for enemy casualties or weapon caches and refuel the helicopters for the flight back to base.

The limited endurance of the Alouette helicopters meant that they could not linger over a contact indefinitely before having to refuel. Where possible this was staggered so that the troops on the ground were never completely without helicopter support; when the K-car had to break off, the fireforce commander swapped temporarily to a G-car to maintain control.

During the most intense periods of the war, troops might return from one call-out, snatch a meal and replenish ammunition and water then go out on a second or even third call-out. Alerts late in the day were disliked, since if the operation carried on after dark, the troops would have to sleep out in the bush with only what they had on them, and be picked up at first light.

External operations and camp attacks

Although fireforce operations were tactically effective, they used a great deal of resources to kill relatively small numbers of guerrillas. Worse, they only eliminated enemy forces who had already infiltrated into Rhodesia and might

have achieved part of their mission to subvert the local population before being eliminated. It also meant the nationalists could control the tempo of the war by altering the rate at which they infiltrated troops. The Rhodesian government realised it could not win the war by remaining on the defensive, and had to take the war to the enemy by attacking guerrilla bases in neighbouring states.

A vehicle-borne column of Selous Scouts attacked the Nyadzonya camp in Mozambique in August 1976, killing more than 1,000 ZANLA troops. Although effective in military terms, it produced a political backlash when ZANLA presented it as an attack on a refugee camp.

The RLI's first major external operation was Operation Dingo, in November 1977. Two large ZANLA training camps were attacked at Chimoio and Tembue, deep within Mozambique, which were believed to contain between 5,000 and 8,000 guerrillas. The logistics of the raid were extremely challenging. The operation required almost every strike aircraft Rhodesia possessed (four Canberra bombers, seven Hawker Hunter fighters, four ageing de Havilland Vampires and four Lynx) plus six paratroop Dakotas and a seventh as an airborne command post. It also required many of Rhodesia's best troops, and almost every available helicopter: ten troop-carrying G-cars, ten K-cars and two command and liaison helicopters – plus ten G-cars loaned covertly by South Africa to carry admin base personnel, although these would not take part in the actual attack. No fireforce support would be available inside Rhodesia during the operation, and each G-car would have to make ten trips to extract the troops, parachutes and captured equipment, without allowing for any losses. Any problem lifting the troops out afterwards would leave them stranded deep inside Mozambique.

Chimoio was 90km inside Mozambique, while Tembue was 225km from the border, too far for the short-ranged Alouette helicopters to fly there and return without refuelling. Consequently, men from Support Commando would be helicoptered into enemy territory to establish a support and refuelling base 20km from the target, using fuel and 20mm ammunition dropped by parachute.

Even though ZANLA felt relatively safe so far from the border, the camp consisted of numerous dispersed elements covering 25km², as a precaution against bombing. Even the lowest estimate – 2,500 guerrillas in the camp – meant the Rhodesian troops would be outnumbered 14:1. In fact, the number



A Lynx ground attack aircraft taxis out before a fireforce operation. The machine guns mounted in over-wing blisters were primarily to suppress ground fire as the aircraft delivered rockets or bombs. (RLI Regimental Association)

was near the maximum estimate of 8,000, and the attacking troops would be outnumbered 44:1. Worse, FRELIMO troops were based nearby and might attempt to assist ZANLA. However, the potential gain justified the risk. Aside from the material damage that could be inflicted, the ZANLA leadership, including Robert Mugabe, were believed to be at the camp, and striking at ZANLA in its safe havens would strengthen Rhodesia's position in the ongoing political negotiations.

All troops and aircrew were briefed at New Sarum the day before the operation using a huge three-dimensional model set up in a hangar. To maintain operational security, nobody was allowed to leave after the briefing, and they slept on beds set up in another hangar.

The plan went off extremely successfully. The guerrillas at Chimoio were at their morning muster parade when the first wave of air strikes hit. They had been lulled into a false sense of security by the use of a decoy DC-8 cargo jet that flew low over the camp to disguise the noise of the incoming strike aircraft, and suffered significant immediate casualties.

One hundred and forty-four Rhodesian paratroopers (96 from the SAS plus 48 from the RLI) and a further 40 heliborne RLI troops were inserted to form stop lines around three sides of the camp to prevent guerrillas escaping. The fourth side of the box was closed by ten K-car gunships, which also attacked targets such as anti-aircraft positions within the camp. The stop lines were in contact almost immediately, killing hundreds of the enemy as they attempted to flee, though many managed to escape through gaps in the lines, or through the open fourth side.

The RLI's commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Peter Rich, had no official role, but went in as a rifleman alongside his son, who was serving as a troop commander.

Since the helicopters could refuel and rearm at the admin base nearby, they could be back in action relatively quickly, whereas the jets had to return to New Sarum. The admin base technicians even performed major repairs to helicopters damaged by ground fire, including rotor blade and engine replacements.

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FIREFORCE OPERATION, c.1978

This plate shows a typical fireforce operation in progress, c.1978, although the stages shown here would not all be happening at the same time.

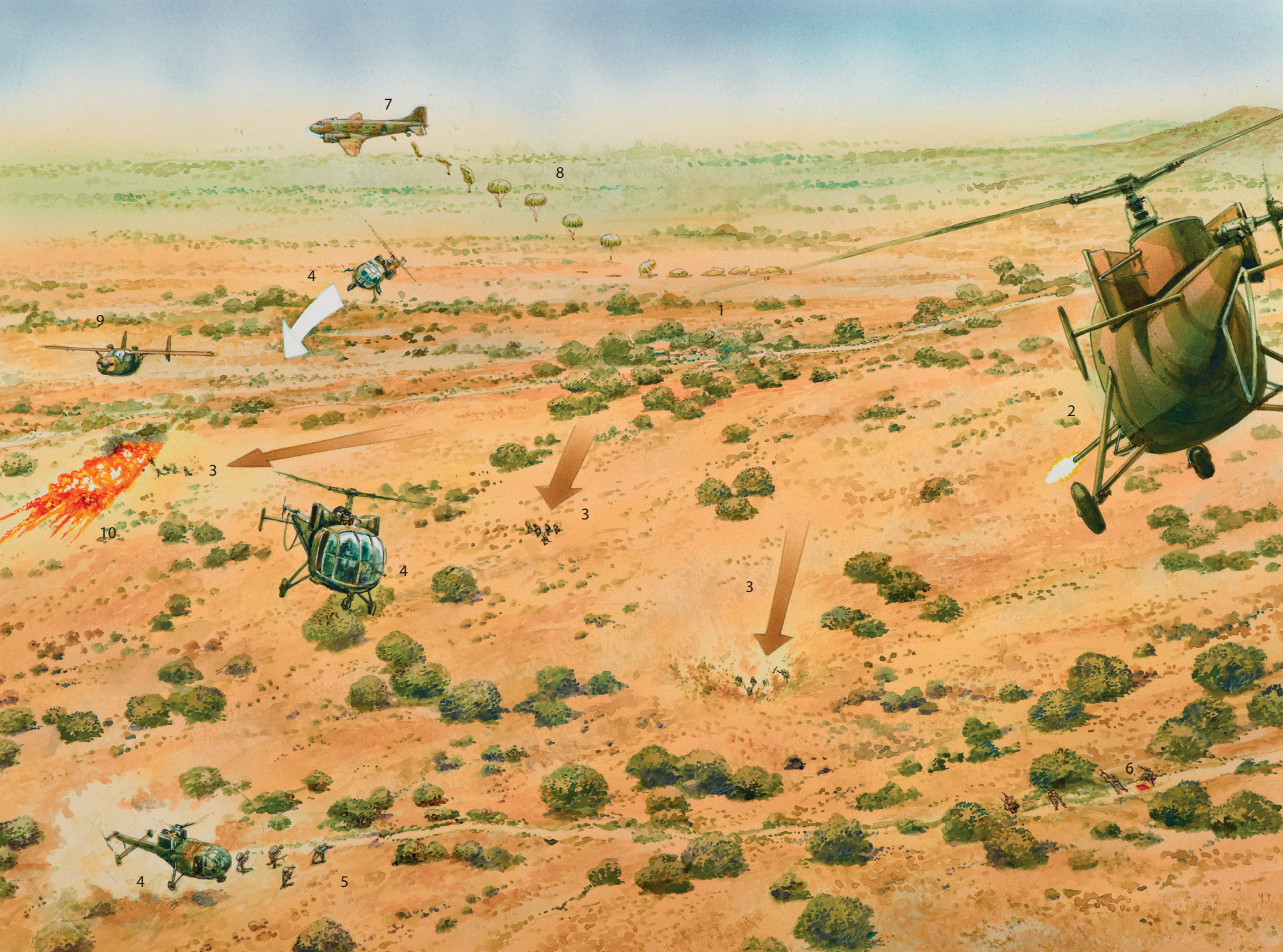
A guerrilla camp (1) has been located, either by air recce or an OP, and an RLI fireforce has responded. The K-car (2) is the first aircraft on the scene, and the army fireforce commander on board will control the operation from above as well as engaging guerrillas with the K-car's cannon.

Following standard practice, the guerrillas (3) bomb-shell (scatter) and evade rather than trying to fight it out with the fireforce. For obvious reasons, they will try to use the escape routes offering the best cover, often along streams. The fireforce commander will try to prevent this by using the troop-carrying G-cars (4) to drop off heliborne infantry stop groups (5) to close off escape routes. One of the stop groups (6) has laid out a marker panel to indicate radio failure.

Once the stop groups are in place, the fireforce commander will select the best place for the Dakota (7) to drop its paratroopers (8). After gathering up their parachutes for later recovery, the paratroopers will form a sweep line.

The fireforce commander might also use the Lynx ground attack aircraft (9) to deliver rockets, bombs or napalm (10), though as this was less accurate than the K-car's cannon, it could not be used in such close proximity to friendly troops.

To minimise the danger of collisions, all the fireforce aircraft flew left-handed orbits, so they were never heading towards each other.



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A fireforce MAG gunner, camo'd up and ready to go. He is wearing the one-piece camouflage jumpsuit. (RLI Regimental Association)

By early afternoon, the Rhodesian forces had secured the camp. Special Branch intelligence specialists were flown in to evaluate the mass of documents captured, including material proving that Nyadzonya camp had been a military target, while used parachutes, jump helmets and the like were collected and flown back to Rhodesia.

Tons of captured war materiel was also recovered for use by the security forces, while large stockpiles of food and medicine – much supplied by charitable organisations including Oxfam and the World Council of Churches – were destroyed. The original plan to evacuate the troops before nightfall grounded the Rhodesian helicopters was extended, as processing the captured equipment was taking so long. Instead, a significant force remained at the camp overnight, and ambushed returning guerrillas who believed the Rhodesians had left. They then finished the search of the camp before being flown out the following afternoon, along with the men from the support base.

The same troops and aircraft carried out a similar raid on the smaller Tembue camp containing over 3,500 guerrillas two days later, though without the heliborne troops. Since Tembue was much deeper within Mozambique, the Rhodesians had to establish a refuelling base on a steep-sided mountain known as 'the train' near the midpoint of the route, as well as another admin base

10km from the target. Both were defended by 16-man RLI security elements, including mortar teams.

Although the ZANLA commanders had not been at the Chimoio camp, the raids were an outstanding success. Aside from the destruction of the camps and their contents, ZANLA admitted nearly 1,100 of its personnel had been killed at Chimoio, and another 600 at Tembue. Many more were injured or deserted, their morale severely damaged by the realisation that they could be attacked without warning in what they had believed to be inviolable sanctuaries. By comparison, the Rhodesians suffered only two dead.

The next major external was Operation Uric in September 1979. One hundred and ninety-two RLI soldiers took part, alongside 112 SAS, 72 South African Recce commandos and 12 demolition specialists from the Rhodesian engineers. They had significant air support and were transported by helicopters including the newly acquired Agusta-Bell 205s and several Pumas on covert loan from South Africa.

The intention was to destroy the infrastructure of the border regions of Mozambique, by mining roads, destroying railways and blowing bridges up to 320km from the border and attacking both ZANLA and FRELIMO camps, including a major base at Mapai, 50km inside Mozambique. This would both make infiltration more difficult physically, since the guerrillas would have to travel through a wasteland to even reach the Rhodesian border, and make clear to the FRELIMO leader Samora Machel that continued support for ZANLA would cost his country dearly.

Again, it was necessary to establish an admin base well inside Mozambique and hold it for several days, to provide local support for the troops on the

ground. The mining and bridge demolition phase of the operation was generally successful, but the ZANLA and FRELIMO troops at Mapai offered determined resistance from a well-designed trench network which had to be cleared position by position.

One of the Agusta-Bells was lost to ground fire, but most of the troops aboard survived. Worse, a South African Puma was shot down, killing all 17 men aboard, including 9 from the RLI's 1 Cdo. The blow was more keenly felt because not only was the crash too deep within Mozambique for the bodies of the dead to be recovered, but the crash site had to be obliterated by an air strike to conceal South African involvement.

Lacking the troop strength to fight through the entrenched positions at Mapai, and unwilling to take the heavy casualties that would inevitably result, the Rhodesians withdrew – one of the few times this happened. They had inflicted serious casualties on the enemy, destroyed much war materiel, made further infiltration much more difficult and – perhaps most importantly – convinced Machel to force ZANU back to the conference table.

This was followed shortly after by operations Miracle and Tepid. In both cases, the Rhodesian forces found the dispersed camps occupied by hundreds of guerrillas and defended by well-laid out networks of trenches and bunkers, with interlocking fields of fire and plentiful support weapons, including heavy machine guns, mortars and recoilless rifles.

Although the Rhodesians managed to take the positions in both cases – an impressive achievement since the ratio of forces in both cases reversed the 3:1 superiority for the attacker recommended by conventional military manuals – the guerrillas were able to withdraw in good order.

The last days of the RLI (1979–80)

Despite Bishop Abel Muzorewa becoming Rhodesia's first black prime minister, the Internal Settlement of April 1979 did not end the war. ZANU and ZAPU boycotted the elections, apparently believing they could still win total victory in the field, and British pressure prevented international recognition and the lifting of sanctions.

Indeed, one of the main aims of the 1979 strikes into Mozambique and Zambia was to pressure the nationalists' external sponsors into forcing them back to the negotiating table, leading to the Lancaster House agreement of December 1979. The ceasefire which followed saw the RLI withdrawn back to barracks, while the guerrillas massed at assembly points throughout the country, supervised by a British-led monitoring force.

The RLI found itself manning security checkpoints and conducting show-of-force patrols in Salisbury to maintain the morale of the white population. This sat badly with the troops, especially since many believed that the guerrillas in the assembly points were largely untrained *majibas* while most of the real guerrillas were still at large, intimidating voters ahead of the upcoming elections.



A 2 Cdo patrol pauses in the Zambezi valley to check their map. (RLI Regimental Association)

Parachutes were scarce assets in sanction-strapped Rhodesia, and were recovered wherever possible. Here, parachutes are recovered after Operation Dingo in 1977. The screens over the exhausts of the Alouette in the background were added in 1974/75, and dispersed the hot jet exhaust, making it harder for heat-seeking missiles to lock on. (RLI Regimental Association)



Although the Rhodesian security forces hoped that the moderate Muzorewa (or even Joshua Nkomo) would win the election, they developed a contingency plan (Operation Quartz) to wipe out the guerrillas at the assembly points if they refused to accept an electoral victory by the moderates, or if Robert Mugabe – the least acceptable candidate to the white population – looked likely to achieve an electoral majority through intimidation.

In the event, although voter intimidation was so widespread that the Rhodesians argued the February 1980 elections should be declared void, the British governor, Lord Soames, refused to do so and the result – an absolute majority for Robert Mugabe – stood. Operation Quartz was never activated.

Paratroopers help each other into their harnesses. Note the 9mm Star pistol worn by the man on the right. (RLI Regimental Association)



Independence followed in April 1980. While the new government was keen to keep black elements of the security forces in place, it regarded the elite units of the old regime – the RLI, SAS and Selous Scouts – as potential threats and disbanded them as quickly as possible.

The unit's last few months were spent on training and anti-poaching patrols; many of the men left the battalion, and sometimes the country, unwilling to serve the Mugabe government. The RLI officially ceased to exist on 31 October 1980.

Casualties and medical support

Operating in small units, RLI troops had to provide immediate medical support for their casualties themselves. Recruits were taught first aid as part of their basic training, and refresher sessions were common while waiting for fireforce call-outs.

Every trooper carried one or two field dressings (since bullets made both entrance and exit wounds) plus an ampoule of Sosegon (a morphine substitute) attached to his dog tags. One soldier in each four-man stick carried a small medical pack; he was not necessarily a trained medic, but might have received a 3–4-day training course. Since blood loss was a major problem with gunshot



Soldiers from 1 Cdo stand in front of their vehicle, 1975. Two men at the centre of the back row and one in the foreground have rifle grenades fitted to their rifles, while another appears to be armed with a semi-automatic shotgun. (RLI Regimental Association)

wounds, each stick also carried at least one saline IV pack, for transfusion into a casualty to maintain blood pressure long enough for him to be evacuated.

Each troop had a medic, who received a 3–4-week medical course. Troop medics had no special rank, and continued to serve as riflemen in their sticks. Each Commando had a specialist medic (generally a corporal) who had undergone an intensive 3-month MA3 course, which included working in the accident and emergency department of a local hospital to gain practical experience, and was issued with a large medical kit and a drug chest which remained at base. Finally, the battalion had a commissioned medical officer, a fully qualified doctor with surgical training. In 1978 the unit acquired a mobile resuscitation unit (MRU), essentially a portable mini-field hospital in an air-conditioned trailer. This could be set up wherever it was needed within 20 minutes, and was manned by the medical officer (MO) and two assistants. Although it could be used to perform surgery on site, its main function was to stabilise severe casualties for onward evacuation.

Serious casualties were evacuated as quickly as possible by helicopter, which might require moving them to the nearest helicopter LZ, or even clearing one. The helicopter would then take them either to a fireforce base or directly to a civilian hospital. Lightly injured soldiers were placed on 'light duties' at base while they recuperated, while those requiring prolonged hospital care usually received it at the civilian Andrew Fleming Hospital in Salisbury.

Despite this medical care, the RLI did suffer fatalities, though nearly as many troops were killed out of action by landmines, accidents or helicopter crashes (50) as were killed in action (85). The majority of these took place during the more intense, last years of the war; of the 85 KIA suffered by the RLI between 1961 and 1979, 66 occurred during the last four years of war, and 31 in 1979 alone.

Since three men were typically seriously injured for every man killed – some of them to a life-altering degree – this represented a very high casualty rate for a unit as small as the RLI, and one that inevitably had an effect on morale. Next of kin of those killed were notified by the adjutant or the

regimental padre. In either case, care was taken to ensure that the family were informed before the formulaic announcement on the nightly news: ‘Combined Operations regret to announce the deaths of ...’

The RLI was unusual in never having any of its soldiers taken prisoner, and the bodies of those killed were usually recovered; the only exceptions were those killed in the helicopter crash during Operation Uric.

BELIEF AND BELONGING

‘They have the faces of boys, but they fight like lions’ – RAR warrant officer describing the RLI (Binda 2007, p. 78)

As with many other elite units, the shared experience of rigorous training, barrack life and operational deployments created a strong group spirit, loyalty and identity. RLI soldiers saw themselves – and were seen – as the best of the Rhodesian Army, superior to the rear echelon ‘jam stealers’ and almost equal to the Selous Scouts and SAS, which both recruited heavily from the RLI.

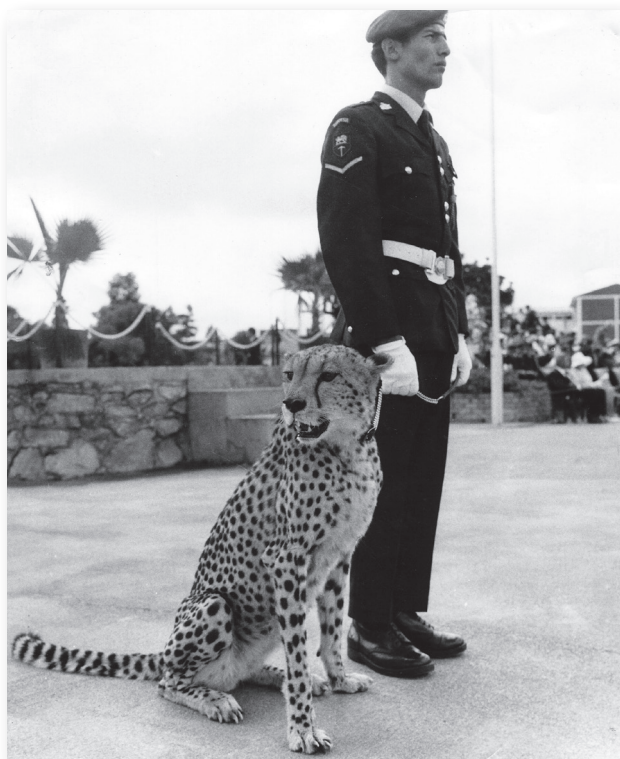
This confidence was reinforced by the experience of combat; the RLI was never defeated in battle, and killed over 30 guerrillas for every friendly casualty. Even when faced with overwhelming odds, such as the 25:1 faced in ‘externals’, most RLI troopers believed that they would prevail.

After a shaky start when their outrageous off-duty behaviour led a Bulawayo newspaper to call for the unit to be disbanded, the RLI gained the respect of the Rhodesian public as the war intensified.

In 1967 Stu Taylor’s parents believed the RLI was ‘full of ex-mercenaries, jailbirds and other social misfits’ and encouraged him to join the police instead (Taylor 2007, p. 19), but by 1975 the unit was applauded by crowds as it paraded through the streets of Salisbury to receive the freedom of the city and ex-soldiers remarked that being a former RLI regular won immediate respect from employers and colleagues after they left the army.

The RLI took some traditions from its British Army roots – such as the officers serving the troops rum-laced ‘gunfire tea’ on Christmas morning – and formed new ones of its own. It adopted *When the Saints Go Marching In* as its regimental march, giving the unit its first and most common nickname of The Saints. They were also known as The Incredibles, from Ian Smith’s toast ‘To the incredible Rhodesian Light Infantry’. The unit adopted a number of cheetahs as mascots over the years, though few lasted long. Each of the Commandos acquired its own nickname (1 Cdo was The Big Red, for instance, while 3 Cdo were The Lovers) and boasted their own pennants and colourful unit signs.

Trooper Saint, the RLI’s cheetah mascot, with his handler Lance-Corporal Mostert in dress uniform with white parade accoutrements. (RLI Regimental Association)





Troopers from 2 Cdo. Note the grenades fixed to the web yokes. (RLI Regimental Association)

With the different Commandos often deployed far apart on bush trips, a unit magazine, *The Cheetah*, was created to remind everyone that they were all part of the same family. Sporting competitions – usually rugby – between Commandos or against outside teams served the same purpose.

Whether or not RLI troopers supported Ian Smith's Rhodesian Front party, most believed that they had to fight to defend their homes, families and way of life. This feeling was often reinforced by seeing guerrilla atrocities inflicted on civilians – both black and white – by landmines, farm attacks and punishment killings of supposed 'sell-outs'.

Although many of the National Servicemen would not have chosen a military career by preference, very few disagreed with the necessity of the war. This did not necessarily mean that they approved of the way it was being conducted; many thought that they should be doing more to strike at guerrilla base camps outside Rhodesia, and that the military leadership was too sensitive to international criticism of such operations.

While the foreign press often depicted the Rhodesian conflict as a race war between black and white, this was an oversimplification; many blacks supported the government, and they provided the majority of its armed forces. There was racial prejudice in Rhodesian society – the RLI itself only took white recruits – but many visitors went out of their way to stress how well blacks and whites generally got along. The RLI served alongside and respected the black RAR, and ultimately fought under a black prime minister.

While few soldiers suffered qualms about killing the enemy, ambushes or fireforce missions sometimes resulted in black civilians being killed in the crossfire, because they had been forced to bring food to the guerrillas or to act as porters. Enemy base camps often included women and even children, and some of these unavoidably became casualties in the fighting. Attitudes varied from man to man; some soldiers who killed such non-combatants suffered subsequent guilt while others thought those who associated with guerrillas deserved what they got, or felt nothing either way.

RLI troops developed their own unique slang known as *taal* ('talk' in Afrikaans) which mixed military jargon, Afrikaans and Shona loan words

Each Commando adopted a somewhat light-hearted badge of its own, seen here surrounding the post-1970 cap badge. Prior to Rhodesia becoming a republic in 1970, the badge had been surmounted by a crown. (RLI Regimental Association)



and expressions picked up from foreign recruits. Hills and valleys become *kopjes* and *gomos*, while the enemy were ‘*terrs*’, ‘*gooks*’ or ‘*floppies*’ (from what they did when shot) to be ‘*culled*’ or ‘*slotted*’ (killed) by the *ouens* (guys).

The result was almost incomprehensible to the uninitiated; former US Marine officer John Cronin, on his way to join the RLI, was warned: ‘none of the rest of the Army understands a damn word they say over there ... you’re going to have to learn an entirely new vocabulary’ (Cronin 2014, Kindle e-book) and a Salisbury newspaper published a translation of common phrases. Space precludes more than one example:

Me and my okes spot two terrs, set our gats on sing and give them a good revving. One goes down and other takes the gap back across the river, but I scheme he got grazed by the flatdogs. The floppy has dagga and a long bunch

F

CONTACT! AN RLI HELIBORNE INFANTRY STICK, 1978

The four-man stick or stop was the basic tactical building block of RLI operations. Typically, the stick leader (1) would be in the middle, where he could control his men most easily by voice or hand signals, while the MAG machine gun (2) provided most of the stick’s firepower. Typically, the men would be more spread out than shown here, so that they would not all be caught by a single grenade or burst of automatic fire.

Although things had tightened up since the mid-1970s when troopers wore more or less whatever they liked, practicality remained more important than uniformity. Clothing is mostly Rhodesian issue camouflage, though modified to suit the wearer. Their footwear includes vellies, both normal and clandestine takkies and the issue brown leather combat boots.

Load-bearing equipment varies from the standard Rhodesian webbing – usually modified to personal taste, for instance by sewing the pouches together so they did not move around – to store-bought chest rigs and fireforce vests.

By this point in the war, camouflage cream was compulsory, and weapons were camouflaged with paint. Rifles had slings and carrying handles removed to avoid snagging while moving through the bush. The longer magazine fitted to one rifle (3) is a scarce 30rd version, originally intended for the heavy barrel version of the FN. Despite its extra capacity, some felt these to be unreliable and they were not always used, even when available.



of green, so we dop a few chibulis that night, ek se!

My mates and I see two guerrillas, set our weapons to full automatic and shoot them up. One guerrilla goes down, while the other retreats in haste across the river, but I reckon he got eaten by the crocodiles. Searching the body turns up some Marijuana and a lot of money, so we celebrate with a few beers that night!

Taal faded away in the late 1970s as National Servicemen and foreigners formed a larger proportion of the unit, though individual words and expressions remained to the end.

The RLI performed well throughout the war, and of the 131 members of the Rhodesian security forces who received the most common decoration for bravery – the Bronze Cross of Rhodesia – 42 were members of the RLI, a higher proportion than simple numbers would indicate. Even so, some RLI personnel believed that soldiers in other units were decorated for things which would be everyday occurrences for the RLI.

The unit culture evolved through the period, changing with the arrival of foreign recruits, and when National Service recruits became a bigger part of the unit's make-up, its social mix altered.

The tempo of operations significantly increased after the abortive 1975 ceasefire, and again in the final year of the war, with the nationalists trying to strengthen their position at the negotiating table. In 1975, a 5–6-week bush trip had typically meant 8–12 contacts with the enemy, but at the peak of the war in 1979, some troops were having 2 and even 3 contacts per day.

Charlie Warren (front left) and his stick running for helicopter uplift during a fireforce operation. The difference between their camouflaged faces and the white skin covered by their headgear – removed because of the helicopter rotor wash – shows the effectiveness of the camouflage cream. (RLI Regimental Association)



Casualties rose in line with the tempo of operations. By 1978–79, one veteran estimates troopers had a roughly 40–50 per cent chance of being killed or wounded (Binda 2007, p. 304), with an obvious effect on morale. Exhaustion set in, and men began to burn out under the pressure, or rely on alcohol, *dagga* or tranquillisers to control it. Many soldiers became disenchanted with their government after the 1979 ceasefire, feeling that not enough was being done to check guerrilla activity. Morale fell again, and men began to leave when their contracts ended.

EXPERIENCE OF BATTLE

Whether on a patrol or fireforce operation, the Rhodesian soldier was often operating in thick bush, especially during the rainy season, and encountered his enemy at short range. Survival often depended on who shot first, and most accurately.

Rifle slings were removed and troops carried their weapons cocked and with safeties off, butts into the shoulder ready to be brought quickly into action. Sights were set for minimum range and troops were taught ‘Quick Kill’ snap-shooting techniques, keeping both eyes open and aiming along the barrel of the weapon. Targets were generally engaged with single shots or two-shot double taps; although the FN rifle was capable of automatic fire, this was difficult to control and expended ammunition rapidly, so bursts were kept short.

Machine-gun belts were usually loaded with a proportion of tracer rounds (typically one tracer to four ball rounds) allowing gunners to guide the stream of bullets onto the target when firing from the hip. Riflemen usually only loaded 18 or 19 rounds into a 20-round FN magazine, to ease spring pressure and reduce stoppages. Some loaded a couple of tracer rounds near the bottom of each magazine, to indicate it was almost empty, or as every fifth round. Wherever possible troops would switch a partially used magazine for a fresh one during a lull in firing, rather than waiting until it was empty. Taping magazines together for quick reloading was officially discouraged, as they picked up dust and grit that caused stoppages.

Troops generally formed a loose sweep line, with men several metres apart but able to see each other as they moved forward, each man covering an assigned arc. Troops were taught to ‘kill’ any cover in their arcs that might conceal an enemy, rather than waiting to identify a clear target or be fired on. The powerful 7.62 x 51mm NATO rounds could punch through bush or tree trunks without difficulty, and still inflict serious wounds on any guerrillas behind them.

Riflemen fired directly into the cover, deliberately keeping their aim low as guerrillas were likely to be kneeling or prone, and to compensate for the weapon’s tendency to climb when fired on automatic. Meanwhile, MAG gunners aimed at the ground immediately in front of the cover, resulting in tumbling rounds and dislodged stones injuring or suppressing anyone behind it as the gunner raked the cover from one side to the other in short bursts.

The close terrain put much of the weight of leadership on the junior NCOs commanding each stick, though the fireforce commander directed the overall battle from the K-car overhead. Many men described his calm voice from above as a steadying influence.



A trooper sits in the door of a fireforce Alouette. Although he still wears shorts, takkies and short sleeves, his light skin is toned down with camouflage cream. (RLI Regimental Association)

If the sweep line encountered the enemy at short range, or were ambushed, the standard response was an immediate assault, with the troops running forward firing over open sights as they closed with the enemy. While requiring a good deal of nerve, this actually resulted in lower casualties than going to ground and getting stuck in a protracted firefight. If the enemy was further away, the sweep line would close by fire and movement. This might mean the sweep line splitting into two halves, with one section running 2–5m forward while the other section provided supporting fire to suppress the guerrillas. The first section then went to ground to provide suppressing fire while the other section moved forward. Alternatively, the entire sweep line divided, with every second man running forward while the remainder gave covering fire, then dropping into cover to provide suppressing fire while the remaining men leapfrogged forward through them to new fire positions. Although this was easier to coordinate, it increased the risk of friendly fire incidents as men ran forward past their comrades who were giving supporting fire.

The suppressing fire was primarily intended to keep the guerrillas' heads down and prevent them firing accurately at the advancing troops, though it would also hopefully inflict some casualties. Once

the distance had been closed using this method, the entire sweep line would then launch an assault as before. If the sweep line was unable to advance to contact – perhaps because of thick, thorny bush – or found itself pinned down by heavy enemy fire, the sweep line commander could bring in supporting fire from the K-car or Lynx, though the bombs and Frantan of the latter were less accurate, limiting their use very close to friendly troops.

When a man in the sweep line was hit, his comrades were supposed to concentrate on winning the fight first before attending to his wounds.

G

LAND TAIL FOLLOW-UP

Although the dramatic airborne element of fireforce operations attracted most coverage, the ground follow-up was a key part of the process. It consisted of additional troops in mine-protected armoured vehicles, such as the Crocodile troop-carrying vehicle (TCV) seen here (1). It picked up the paratroopers and their used parachutes (2, too valuable to waste in sanction-strapped Rhodesia), and brought drums of fuel to refuel the short-ranged Alouettes for their return flight to base (3).

They collected captured enemy weapons (here, two AK47 rifles and an RPD light machine gun, 4), and loaded dead guerrillas into cargo nets for disposal in cremation pits back at the base (5). Live prisoners rode back in the vehicles, for interrogation by Special Branch.

A stick medic (6) is transfusing a saline IV into a wounded trooper to maintain his blood volume after a gunshot wound; the helicopter will lift him directly to a hospital once it is refuelled. If they were lucky, the quartermaster might send sandwiches and Cokes (7) out with the trucks for the fireforce troops, but at the height of the war, these men might be in action again before the end of the day.



An exhausted Support
Commando stick leader catches
up on his sleep after a fireforce
action. (RLI Regimental
Association)



Although apparently harsh, this made good tactical sense; a soldier trying to deliver first aid under fire was likely to become a casualty himself, and with only four men in a stick, a second man not fighting represented too much loss of firepower. A rifleman might take over the stick's MAG if the gunner was hit; its firepower was vital, and had to be brought back into action as quickly as possible.

Once the enemy position had been overrun, the stick leader would take a quick headcount to ensure that everyone was accounted for, arrange for any casualties to be treated or evacuated, deal with enemy dead or prisoners, and get the sweep moving again. Even if no other enemy troops were obvious, it was routine to organise a second sweep in case some guerrillas had been missed, and to locate abandoned weapons and identify tracks or blood spoor from wounded guerrillas for follow-up once the Land Tail arrived.

Prisoners were valued early in the war, since they might provide useful intelligence or even change sides and join the security forces. Towards the end of the war, and particularly after the Viscount incidents, the RLI took fewer prisoners, and wounded guerrillas might be 'finished off', especially if they would be difficult to evacuate. 'Times had changed ... We didn't want guerrilla prisoners who might only get a gaol sentence' (Cocks 1988, p. 245). Returning to the RLI as a troop leader after several years with the Selous Scouts, Dennis Croukamp noted: 'It was something of a shock to suddenly realise how hard these young troopers of mine had become towards their foe. They were absolutely ruthless' (Croukamp 2006, p. 437).

Dead guerrillas were searched, and often photographed for Special Branch to identify. As well as documents, searches often turned up *dagga* (marijuana) and money. Some items of guerrilla kit – such as Bakelite AKM bayonets and Tokarev pistols – were also prized by the troops, as souvenirs or for later sale. Apart from being messy and unpleasant, especially if the corpses had been sitting in the hot sun, such searches could also be dangerous: guerrillas sometimes booby-trapped packs or even the bodies of their own dead by placing a grenade underneath them and removing the pin. Once the weight was removed, the grenade's arming lever was released, and it detonated.

Until the very last year of the war, bodies of the enemy dead were loaded onto trucks or into a helicopter cargo net to be disposed of, either doused with fuel and burned in large cremation pits at the fireforce base or passed to Special Branch, who disposed of them down a disused mine shaft. By the end, however, fireforces were too busy for even such limited niceties.

A fireforce operation could take several hours, and there was often considerable work to be done afterwards, recovering parachutes and refuelling helicopters before the unit could return to base. If the troops were lucky, the Commando quartermaster would arrange for the Land Tail to bring out sandwiches for them, along with Cokes that would be charged to their canteen accounts. If not, they would have to make do with whatever rations they had in their webbing until they were uplifted to base, which might not be until the following day if the light was fading by the time the action finished.

An ambush party might remain at the contact site in case surviving guerrillas returned; this was rarely worthwhile and became less common as time went on.

AFTERMATH

Both regulars and National Servicemen served for fixed terms, rather than 'for the duration', though the unit tried to persuade good National Servicemen to extend their enlistments and become regulars. Those who agreed received back pay equal to the difference between National Service pay and what they would have received as a regular soldier, backdated to the start of their enlistment, a significant financial incentive. Some were promised promotion or the chance to attend specialist courses such as the medical course if they signed on as regulars.

Even those who returned to civilian life still had a military obligation as reservists and were liable for annual call-up each year. By the end of the war, this had increased until reservists were serving on a six weeks on, six weeks off basis, making it difficult to maintain stable civilian lives. Initially, reserve call-ups were done with territorial units, which ex-RLI soldiers often compared unfavourably with their former regiment. From 1978, RLI reservists did their reserve service with their original Commando, easing manpower pressures within the unit.

By the late 1970s, the Rhodesian economy was faltering under sanctions and the cost of the war, large areas had been effectively abandoned as they were too dangerous to farm, and travel between the major towns required joining the daily convoys travelling with military escort. Some ex-soldiers were among those who 'took the gap' and emigrated, with Britain, South Africa and Australia being common destinations. More might have done so, had exchange controls not made it difficult to take any significant savings out of the country.

The statue of 'The Trooper' originally stood on the 'Holy Ground' at Cranborne Barracks, before finally moving to Hatfield House, Bedfordshire. (Author's collection)



Once Robert Mugabe took power in 1980, the RLI was swiftly disbanded. Some soldiers transferred to other units, or remained as training cadre for the first commando battalion of the Zimbabwean Army, but many were reluctant to serve the new regime. Overall, around 60 per cent of the white population emigrated in the decade following independence. The South African Defence Force hired some former Rhodesian soldiers, though many found it difficult to adjust to the more formal, straight-laced and Afrikaans-dominated culture of the South African military. Those who stayed in Zimbabwe found that after a short honeymoon period while the new regime presented a reasonable face to the world, they had little place in the new order.

Ironically, Robert Mugabe's peacetime rule proved more disastrous to the Zimbabwean economy than war and sanctions had been. Agricultural production dropped disastrously, until the former food-exporting 'breadbasket of Africa' was receiving humanitarian food aid. The government blamed the country's woes on the remaining whites, while runaway inflation devalued any savings or pensions to worthlessness.

Some RLI veterans went on to build happy and successful lives and careers. Others suffered from various forms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or alcohol problems as a result of their experiences, though many were never formally diagnosed or treated.

H

HELIBORNE TROOPER WITH KIT, 1978

By 1978, the RLI had embraced the fireforce concept to deal with the increasing number of guerrillas. The T-shirt and takkies (tennis shoes) worn by this man are typical of the relatively informal dress on most operations, though the use of camouflage cream to dull the shine of white skin and break up the outline of the face was now universal. As the troops were helicoptered into action, loads were usually lighter than during patrolling operations, as the troops knew they were unlikely to stay out more than one night.

The handset of the A76 radio tied to his shoulder strap is the only thing to indicate this man is a stick leader, as he wears no rank insignia; the radio itself is in one of the kidney pouches at the back of his belt. His FN rifle is the later version with synthetic furniture, which was less likely to warp in hot, wet conditions, affecting the accuracy of the rifle. It has had its carrying handle and sling removed to prevent them snagging in the bush, while the rifle itself has been camouflaged with paint.

Other items of personal equipment shown include the Rhodesian combat cap (1), with its rear flap (2) intended to shield the neck from the African sun. This could be buttoned up out of the way, or was sometimes simply cut off. Late in the war, troopers were supposed to sew sections of high visibility material inside, so the cap could be inverted as an air recognition marker, but not all did.

The 'Clandestine' version (3) of the standard takkies had smooth soles, supposedly making the wearer harder to track. Though comfortable, some users found them insufficiently hard-wearing.

Guerrilla-style chest webbing (4) became popular among RLI soldiers, either in addition to or instead of standard Rhodesian belt-and-yoke type. Some men wore captured communist items, while others – like the one shown here – were made up by Feredays, a Salisbury camping equipment store.

Paratroopers were issued a 9mm pistol as a back-up weapon, either a Browning Hi-power (5) or a Star (6).

The grenade-launcher sight on the FN rifle (7) normally lay flat along the top of the hand guard, but could be flicked up, then rotated so that it locked into the vertical position, before the tail of a rifle grenade was slipped over the flash hider of the rifle.

As well as the troopers' basic kit, stick leaders carried maps, lensatic compasses (8) and mini-flares (9) to mark the location of their stick.

Paratroopers might wear British airborne steel helmets (10), but these were in short supply, and some men wore locally sourced crash helmets (11). After 1977, almost all troopers were parachute-trained, and entitled to wear jump wings (12) on their uniforms.



COLLECTING, MUSEUMS AND RE-ENACTMENT

There is no museum covering the RLI in Zimbabwe; the Mugabe government had no desire to celebrate enemies. The regimental colours, trophies, records and the statue of ‘The Trooper’ were shipped to South Africa on disbandment, then to the (now closed) British Empire and Commonwealth Museum in Bristol, UK.

There is a regimental museum in Bedford, UK, maintained by the regimental association (www.therli.com), and ‘The Trooper’ now stands in the grounds of Hatfield House, just north of London.

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ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANC	African National Congress
BSAP	British South African Police
Cdo	Commando
CSPEP	Carrying Straps Personal Equipment Parachutist
DB	detention barracks
FAL	Fusil Automatique Léger
FN	Fabrique Nationale (Belgian)
FRELIMO	Frente de Libertação de Moçambique – Mozambique Liberation Front
HEAT	High-Explosive Anti-Tank
JOC	Joint Operations Command
LMG	light machine gun
LZ	landing zone
MAG	Mitrailleuse d'Appui Général
MO	medical officer
MRU	mobile resuscitation unit
Nashos	National Servicemen
NCO	non-commissioned officer
OP	observation post
RAR	Rhodesian African Rifles
RLI	Rhodesian Light Infantry
SAS	Special Air Service
SMG	sub-machine gun
SNEB	Société Nouvelle des Établissements Edgar Brandt
TCV	troop-carrying vehicle
UDI	Unilateral Declaration of Independence
WP	white phosphorous
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army – the military wing of ZANU
ZANU	Zimbabwe African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwe African People's Union
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army – the military wing of ZAPU

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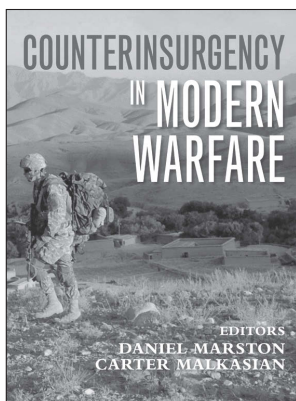
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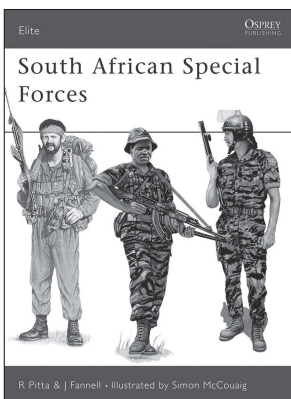
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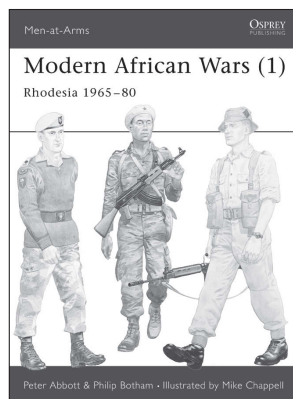
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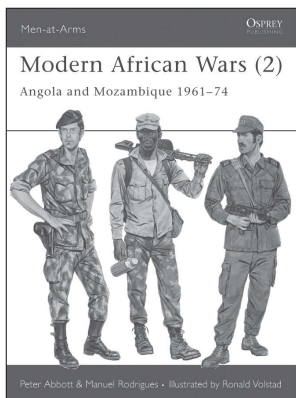
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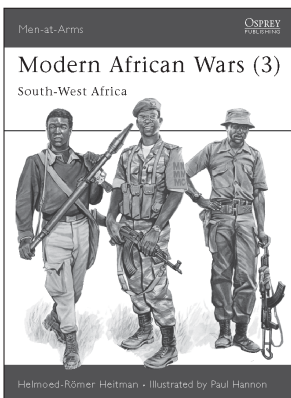
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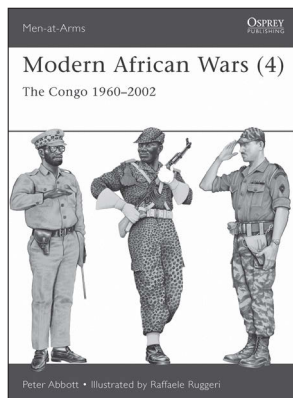
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